



(Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries)
THE GREAT LITERARY SALONS



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THE DUCHESSE DU MAINE.

From a French School (Seventeenth Century) Portrait in the Duc de Vendôme's Collection.

THE GREAT LITERARY SALONS

(XVII AND XVIII CENTURIES)

Lectures of the Musée Carnavalet

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THORNTON BUTTERWORTH, LIMITED
15 BEDFORD STREET, LONDON, W.C. 2

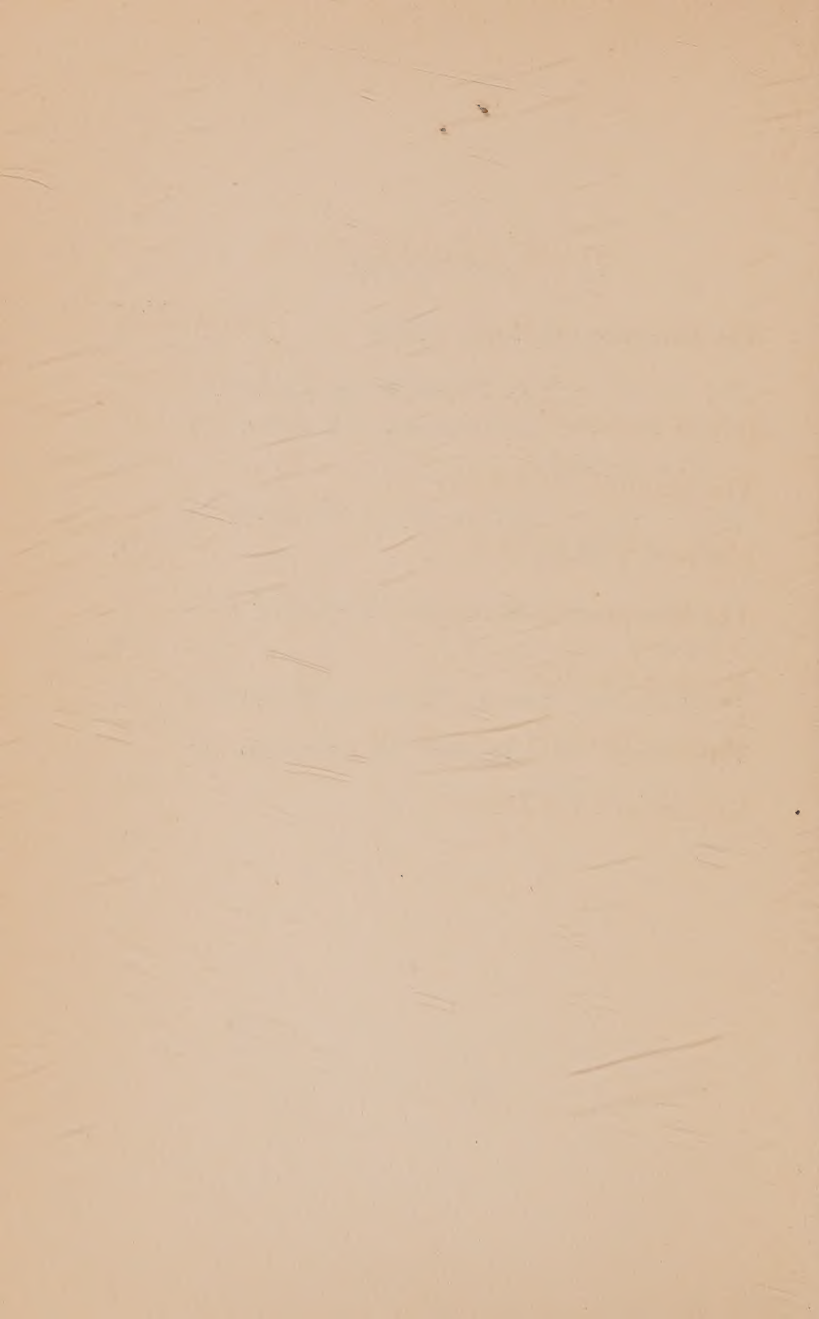
First Published - - - - 1930

PRINTED IN GUERNSEY, C.I., BRITISH ISLES,
BY THE STAR AND GAZETTE COMPANY LTD.

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Introduction
LOUIS GILLET

INTRODUCTION
INAUGURAL ADDRESS FOR THE
EXHIBITION ILLUSTRATING THE LITERARY SALONS
OF THE
SEVENTEENTH AND EIGHTEENTH CENTURIES
AT THE
MUSÉE CARNAVALET

IN what house are we met together to-day? Who offers us this exhibition in which knick-knacks, furniture, portraits combine to revive a thing that has ceased to be?

We are almost at the World's end here in this district of the "Marais"—the marsh—now so deserted by society, so plebeian and commercial, but which for all its social degeneration, has a beauty and poetry that have survived the upheavals of the past thirty years. It is the remnant of a Paris where silent and provincial corners still exist. Where there are grass-grown streets, flanked by mansions that were not built yesterday—the *Hôtels de la Vieille Noblesse*, full of memories.

Having found the Marais, let us wander through

this maze of narrow streets in quest of the Musée Carnavalet. If you go where chance leads you, your trouble will be rewarded, and when in the end you come upon the Musée Carnavalet you will find one of the most interesting Museums of Paris—the most Parisian of them all: for this is the museum of private life, of the newspaper, the anecdote, the sign-board, the miscellany; of dress, trinkets, trifles—the museum of curios, of picturesque bric-à-brac—where all the unforeseen details of history have found a refuge. It is this mass of gleanings, crumbs disdained by the galleries of masterpieces, that build up the likeness of the past. Here pious hands have garnered the wreckage of what is daily destroyed by barbarous “improvements”. Jealous scholars have snatched these touching fragments of bygone days from the Vandal and saved these wainscots, pierglasses and fire-places from the pickaxe and the marine store. Out of this flotsam and jetsam, in a very few years, M. Jean Robiquet, director of Carnavalet, has reconstructed exquisite interiors, and thanks to him whole suites of rooms have escaped from the massacre of Paris. And every year he revives the interest of amateurs and attracts the public to the days of yore by some special loan-exhibition housed in this appropriate setting. He led off with Mme de

Sévigé, not only because it was her tercentenary, but also because this was her home and she herself could do the honours of the house.

This year she yields place to her juniors, to the newcomers who in their turn form circles about their personality. From room to room, from showcase to showcase, from portrait to portrait, you can see all the noblest personalities of the *ancien régime* right down to the dawn of the Romantic Movement and the Monarchy of July. You will spend a few moments in each of these circles whose centre was some gifted woman; you will enter into a society which treated life as an art and cultivated the flower of conversation: you will have the illusion of being admitted for a moment into the most polite company the world has ever known, of listening to Mme du Deffand, Mlle de Lespinasse or Mlle Aïssee, of living for an hour surrounded by the charming shades of those who, during two hundred years were the heart of a thing that will never rise again—the refined and perfect social life that was called *La Vie de Salon*.

The life of the Salon begins in the seventeenth century in the society of the *Précieuses* and of the Hôtel de Rambouillet. The distinguished women who invented this thing were of great use to society,

for their drawing-rooms were a school of refinement throughout a century which needed much refining.

During the period when the reign of Louis XIV was great, the Salons lost all their importance, for in the unison of the monarchy no one ventured on an *a parte*. The influence of cliques reappears only at the end of the century in the closing years of the reign, and increases during the Regency of Philippe d'Orlèans for much the same reasons as had justified the "Précieuses" during the childhood of Louis XIV. Now, in the minority of his great-grandson, Louis XV, the Salon first reappeared in the house of Mme de Lambert, where the elevation of thought and decency of manners were remarkable in that age of unbridled licence. The court of the Regent was a gambling saloon, but in this Salon dignity and higher thought found a refuge, and conversation free from affectation and yet superior, was led here by such men as Montesquieu and Fontenelle. The first Salon to count as a power and to have a certain influence in the State was that of Mme de Tencin. But it was after her death in the house of her friend (one might almost say her pupil) Mme Geoffrin, that the Salon became a great institution.

Everybody has read the pages consecrated to this model salon by Marmontel, and after him by

Sainte-Beuve. Then, too, the Marquis de Ségur wrote a whole book, the well-known book on the *Kingdom of the Rue St. Honoré*, which was Mme Geoffrin's salon. The title is hardly an exaggeration: this burgess might almost be called a queen, for she was a power and was treated as a potentate, and during the famous journey to Warsaw she was received almost on an equality by kings and emperors and welcomed with as much consideration as though she had been Princess de Trebizonde.

King Stanislas called her "Maman"; the empresses Maria-Teresa and Catherine overwhelmed her with attentions, doing unconscious homage to the great novelty that she represented—public opinion. The reign of opinion had set in: opinion now counted for something, like the embassies and the armies. From the depth of her armchair Mme Geoffrin had her influence on the way the wind blew, and this good lady who did not talk much and was ignorant of the mysteries of spelling, was neither more nor less than the Press, destined to become leading sovereign of Europe.

Nattier's portrait represents her long before her accession and magistracy, and it shows us a purely conventional figure absolutely meaningless and unable to tell us anything about her character.

On the other hand, the documents on the home life of Mme Geoffrin are charming—the little pictures by Hubert-Robert with the drawings from the museum at Valence are among the pearls of the eighteenth century. Here we have the intimacy of Chardin and the sprightliness of Guardi. We really penetrate into the life of this great burgess and can take the inventory of her furniture. The great plumed bed, with its double hangings of red silk suggest a stay-at-home person sensitive to cold, and on the walls the framed drawings reveal the woman of taste—the first who, in addition to her banquets for men of letters, gave dinners to painters. The little bookcase composed of bedside companions suggests the woman who chooses and has her favourite authors. Everything is affluent, simple, solid and meticulously neat and clean: everything expresses the good manager who leaves nothing to chance in her household. The almost monastic dress, the caps of goffered linen, the gown of grey taffeta, are of a refined simplicity expressing the absence of coquetry, or rather the good sense of the woman who has met her Age half-way and dresses not as yesterday but as to-morrow. Nothing for show, nothing remarkable, but everything of the best, the freshest, and the daintiest. This quiet good taste

shows a superior interpretation of a part: a consummate policy to gain an end—the end Madame Geoffrin arrived at—to be a sort of grey-eminence, powerful and strong-willed but seen only in half tones; a very watchful regent with her eye on everything while disdaining to shine herself—like the neutral-toned lining of a casket that throws the diamonds into relief. She was unceasingly active, and from the moment she sprang from her bed had but one thought; and the scene of Mme Geoffrin taking her chocolate and having herself read to by her lackey so as not to lose an instant is a treasure that may provoke a smile but which makes us reflect on the results that can be obtained by a well-organized life.

Side by side with these informal pieces by Hubert-Robert, an admirable drawing by Boucher represents Mme Geoffrin in her official rôle on one of her great reception days. All Paris is assembled to listen to a reading by d'Alembert. Obviously, such scenes can easily be ridiculed: they have a tang of *Le Monde ou l'on s'ennuie* and of receptions in the Palais Mazarin. This is no longer a drawing-room: it is an academy. But still one is amazed at the order that a mere woman had succeeded in imposing on male guests, at the respectful discipline that she

inculcated on her "menagerie" (Mme de Tencin would have said "her animals".) Such men as Duclos, Grimm, Caylus, Diderot, all the hot-heads of the encyclopædia, were terrible housemates, and they all obeyed like a school or a seminary. Mme Geoffrin never allowed a false step nor a folly that would have passed muster in the house of an opera singer or a supper at Sophie Arnould's. When she said, "*Voilà qui est bien,*" enough of that, this call to order ended the conversation. Duclos drew in his claws and Diderot his thunder. Mme Geoffrin was a born parliamentarian, it is she who ought to have been called the *Présidente*.

How did she rule this unruly brood of head-strong philosophers, these uncalled-for susceptibilities, this prickly race of poets? She never told her secret, but we can guess by what remains of her. It was by her admirably even temper and above all by her tact, that real genius of woman. All the objects with which she surrounded herself, this perfume-box by Gouthière, that time-piece on her mantel, the furniture, the dinner service (a gift from the empress Marie-Thérèse) all testify to the same effort, to a thought busied exclusively with one subject—how to honour mind, how to assure to talent its due rank and place, how

to give native superiority rights of citizenship in society. How to bring together great nobles and men of letters round her table and lead them to converse on a footing of equality, how to humanize pride of birth and soften the arrogance of plebeian genius, how to give the same habits to men of every social class and find ground for a cordial understanding, how to thaw the hauteur of one and extract another from Bohemia, how to organize a republic of the elect in one's home and form there a States-General of every sort of merit. This was a high ideal and it was not Mme Geoffrin's fault if she did not completely attain it. Only Minerva herself could have done so.

Fundamentally the worthy dame of the Faubourg Saint Honoré was an excellent Frenchwoman. Nature made her what all our women wish to be—a capital hostess, and she reigned by virtue of her qualities as a house-keeper. Without exceptional beauty or talent, without fascination or any romantic quality she knew exactly what she wanted and what is needed to make peace reign between men—a task that exacts self-forgetfulness, patience, judgment and perhaps even more heart than sense, and of which she confides the secret in her phrase “Let us be amiable.”

When Mme Geoffrin died none of the rival hostesses could pick up her sceptre, and then came the Revolution and the Empire, stormy times which held out little hope to the despots of drawing-rooms. For more than twenty years no one breathed without leave from the Master of the hour. The silence of a camp regulated by drum and bugle ruled over society.

The last Salon I shall speak of is that of Madame Récamier. Among the many stupid devastations committed during the past twenty years, the destruction of the Abbaye-aux-Bois in the Rue des Sèvres, sacrificed to Estate Agents and liquidators, is the most unpardonable.

A few years ago this charming building, the scene of other days, stood intact behind high ivy-covered walls, and was one of the most peaceful retreats in Paris. It has been entirely destroyed: and a modern street bearing the name Récamier is all that survives of the setting of a most touching romance and of a site sacred to the memory of Juliette Récamier.

The furniture, the wreckage of this famous salon—with its transit-instrument by Jacob, its loo table, the bronze clock representing Cupid and Psyche, the Sèvres vases, all that a family can inherit from

an exquisite personality, have been preserved by Dr. Lenormant. We can identify every detail of Dejuinne's little painting—an exact portrait of the room in which for thirty years, Mme Récamier received all the celebrities of France and Europe. And every day for thirty years (except during his embassies and journeys) Chateaubriand, after having scribbled a note in the morning came from the Rue d'Enfer on the stroke of two with such punctuality that the neighbours set their watches by his passage. It was in that salon that the patriarch of letters read to a chosen audience the manuscript of *Mémoires d'outre tombe*: and in that room Lamartine recited the first *Méditations*, *Le Lac* and *Le Vallon* before the public read them. Victor Hugo, Sainte-Beuve, Delacroix, Merimée, Montalembert, Lamennais, all the glories of the Romantic school came here to solicit the suffrages of the singer of *Les Martyres*. Here, too, Rachel in her youth recited Racine, and Ary Scheffer, had his picture of *St. Augustin* brought here for Juliette to look at with her failing eyes.

If ever there was an extraordinary social phenomenon, it was, surely, the power and the prestige of this woman, who without wealth, without the prestige of birth, reigned by the sole gift of her beauty.

The example of the recluse of the Abbaye aux Bois who made neither visits nor advances, had no carriage, no livery, no house, who occupied two paved rooms in a convent, is one of the most extraordinary in the history of letters. The rich and the great—queens, generals, ambassadors,—were full of attentions for her; poor though she was, with no riches other than her grace, Mme Récamier received all Europe in her cell, and proved how esteemed a third floor room in Paris may become in the eyes of the whole world.

She was forty when her husband's ruin reduced her to the retreat that her spell transformed into a frame and an attraction, and she was already surrounded by the halo of a beauty that was the despair of painters—a beauty that does not exist in her portraits but that must have been as evident as the light of day. Another attribute was still more remarkable—the ice or crystal of her heart, an indefinable immaculateness that this eternal maiden carried under her white robes: it is supposed that no man won from her more than a smile. Even from her husband she received only the name. The most burning passions were kindled as she passed, but no one, was he prince or emperor, could boast of having cost her a reproach. Like Diana shrouded

in her clouds, she soared above all desire, catching every heart in the meshes of veils that remained the veils of an immortal vestal. Then she met Chateaubriand: she was the greatest beauty, he the greatest genius of their century and their stars met. Were they in love with one another? Did she sacrifice her glory to the enchanter? The mystery has never been cleared up; but probably René, who had as yet scarce met with a cruel woman, was obliged for all his stormy protests, to wear the yoke of friendship, like his rivals.

Let us accord to Juliette her maiden lustre: the brilliance of her fame is reflected like the orient of Phœbe from the fires whose ardour she refused: her radiance is not the flame of love, it is the chaste light of the moon.

Why should we deny that once in this world's history there was a woman living in the world yet not of it; no stranger to the things of the heart, but ignorant as a nun of the humiliating laws of the senses?—A woman who, without plucking the rose was satisfied by its perfume? And in truth it is for this very reason that Juliette played a part in the history of her times, and was the incarnation of Poetry to all the Romantic school. The Lady of the Convent of the Rue de Sèvres represents that reign

THE GREAT LITERARY SALONS

of refinement and delicacy whose establishment has always been pre-eminently woman's work in France, and which is, perhaps, the crown of civilization.

LOUIS GILLET.

The Salon of the Marquise de Rambouillet

LOUIS BATIFFOL

THE SALON OF THE MARQUISE DE RAMBOUILLET IN THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

DURING the seventeenth century, those who left the Palais-Royal to walk in the direction of the Seine, took a street named Saint-Thomas-du-Louvre. The buildings now occupied by the Ministry of Finance did not exist, and on their site was this short street flanked on the right hand, first by the Hôtel de Rambouillet and then by the Hôtel de Chevreuse.

The Hôtel de Rambouillet was newly built, for the family of Angennes de Rambouillet had acquired the property on May 7th, 1599, and had pulled down the old Hôtel du Halde to construct a modern mansion where various innovations destined to set the fashion were much admired, and it was rumoured that they were the invention not of the architect but of the Marquise de Rambouillet née Catherine de Vivonne. Come with me, we will look round.

The house is not very large. The carriage

entrance gives access to a court whence is obtained to the left, a glimpse of the garden that stretches out behind it, for the house is not so wide as the site. The frontage in the style of the houses of the Place Royale (now Place des Vosges) is in red brick with stone facings and a steep roof. Let us go in.

The door is to the extreme right of the building, and the ground floor contains only the domestic offices. A beautiful stone staircase with balusters of wrought iron leads to the first floor. This staircase is one of the inventions of the lady of the house. Instead of placing it in the centre, as was done everywhere, she had it put at the end, and in place of the square well that everyone had she had thought out a semi-circular movement with a railing "rounded in a portion of a circle".

Here we are on the first floor. The whole series of salons is open before us and the door is in the centre of each room instead of at the side—another innovation of the Marquise. The windows, very lofty, extend from the floor to the ceiling—another of her ideas—and finally there are alcoves which, according to Tallemant des Réaux was an arrangement imported by her from Spain. The novels of the time, such as *Le Grand Cyrus* of

Mme de Scudéry, have described this famous mansion under the name of "Palais de Cléomire", and elsewhere "Palais d'Arthénice", Arthénice being the anagram that Malherbe had made of Mme de Rambouillet's name Catherine. For greater accuracy we will follow the inventories made after the death of the Marquis in 1652 of the Marquise in 1666 and of their daughter, Julie d'Angennes in 1671.

First we enter "*la grande Salle*" which must certainly have been the dining-room. The walls were hung with ten pieces of tapestry of the high warp representing hunting scenes. There were sideboards of walnut wood, benches, and a long table "drawing out at both ends" and covered with a Turkey rug. Eight pictures adorned the room, they were portraits of Catherine de Medicis, Charles IX, Henri III, Henri IV and were hung in front of the tapestries.

Then followed the ante-room. Here too were six pieces of tapestry of the high warp; their subject the burning of Troy: there were chairs, arm-chairs, a table covered with a Turkey carpet, sideboards of Chinese lacquer and of ebony: occasional tables.

Then followed a room with an alcove in which

stood a bed with walnut columns and hung in black satin with flowers in silk embroidery. Six of those very low chairs with high straight backs that were called "caquetoires", covered in rose-coloured tapestry; armchairs, tables, and little round candlestick stands. A large oriental carpet was spread on the parquet, the curtains were of Isabel colour taffetas, with hangings on the walls; and the alcove was adorned with a fine cross-stitch tapestry representing the loves of the gods. From the ceiling hung a lustre of rock-crystal, and all over the walls there were pictures large and small, objects of devotion, miniatures, canvases and coloured prints.

Then followed *La Chambre bleue*, the famous blue room, which instead of being painted red and tawny as all such rooms then were, was painted blue and adorned with hangings of blue design on a gold ground. These were Flemish tapestries of eight subjects representing small figures standing in porticoes, a gift of Louis XIII to M. de Rambouillet. In this room all that the taste of the period could collect of most rare and costly was brought together. A magnificent oriental carpet covered the floor: on one side stood a rest-bed of red satin bordered with gold thread and brocaded in gold: against the walls were Chinese or Spanish chests; here and there

chairs with fardingals, armchairs, folding stools covered with red velvet with fringes of fine gold; cushions of red plush with heavy gold galoons; ebony tables with inset plaques of silver; a beautiful domed copper clock. From the ceiling hung a lustre of gilded copper held by a rope of gold and silk. Everywhere there was a profusion of knick-knacks and curiosities—little bronzes, and a profusion of vases in China, Delft, Venetian glass, rock-crystal, all filled with flowers, for flowers abounded in the reception rooms of Mme de Rambouillet.

Next to the blue room is a little cabinet where the mistress of the house could isolate herself. Mme de Rambouillet had not thought of this in the original plan: but (according to Tallemant) a sudden fancy seized her one day, and she was inspired to build a sort of loggia jutting out beyond the main wall of the house, above the adjoining gardens of the asylum for the blind—the “Quinze-Vingts”. It was a little room whose three exterior walls were each pierced by a window and had been built only at hours when there were no guests in the house, so that one evening Mme de Rambouillet was able to surprise her guests by drawing back a tapestry behind which everyone supposed there was

a wall and displaying a charming room already occupied by the daughter of the house most sumptuously dressed. The pedants christened this new room "*la loge de Zirphée*", after a Queen in the *Amadis de Gaule*.

Such were the salons of the Hôtel de Rambouillet. We need not climb to the second floor for there were only the servants' quarters and a room called "*L'Ermitage*" stocked with books Italian, Spanish and Latin. The garden lay to the west (where is now the Place du Carrousel) and was not large, only about sixteen hundred square yards with a broad central walk, pierced by a round flower bed and surrounded by four ribbon borders filled with flowers. And along the high walls that enclosed it Mme de Rambouillet had planted a row of sycamores to mask the Hospice of the Quinze-Vingt to the right and at the end the cemetery of that asylum.

So much for the home: let us look at its owners.

The d'Angennes de Rambouillet were of an old family whose members, as one used to say, had never filled great situations. Originally from the province of the Perche, they had from the fourteenth century possessed the estate of Rambouillet which was created a marquise for their benefit. They were

Parisians, and before going to the Rue Saint-Thomas du Louvre had lived in a house on the site of the present Palais Royal since the fourteenth century. Most of the Rambouillets were very tall and were nicknamed the Rambouillet Fir-trees. He in whom we are interested, Charles d'Angennes, husband of the Marquise, is a tall thin man, not very good looking, with small eyes, a big forehead, bushy brows and thick lips. He was a Councillor of State in 1607 at the age of thirty: and in 1626 was sent by Richelieu to Spain as Ambassador extraordinary. On his return, in 1629, he was named Master of the King's Wardrobe and Knight of the Holy Spirit. He was a kind, amiable man, anxious to please, but weak-willed. A man who made himself cheap, and gave lavishly, but who was contentious and argumentative. His sight was bad from an injury received in youth, and in his later years he became almost blind. In his wife's salon he played the ungrateful almost comic part of the husband of no importance.

His wife, on the other hand, was a striking personality. On her mother's side she was of Italian origin, for her father Jean de Vivonne, Marquis of Pisani, having been named ambassador at Rome, met and married in 1587 a Roman princess, Julia

Savelli, widow of an Orsini, and it was in Rome that was born, in 1588 this Catherine, destined to become Marquise de Rambouillet through her marriage in 1600 with Charles d'Angennes, Vidame d'Amiens, who succeeded his father in 1611, he being then thirty-four years of age and his wife twenty-three. According to the law of the period, Catherine was an Italian, but in April 1594 Henry IV gave her letters of naturalization. She remained a Roman in many respects, and both the miniature on vellum and Mignard's portrait in the Spencer collection show that she preserved the Italian suppleness, mobility and grace. She was fresh-coloured—perhaps she became rather stout too early—but her pretty black eyes, sparkling and dancing, reveal a lively, dashing character. According to the author of *Le Grand Cyrus*, who depicts her under the name of Cléomire, her glance was her leading characteristic; but Segrais adds that she was very intelligent, just and upright, with a fine sense of the proprieties. She spoke several languages and knew an infinite number of things, but a person who knew her very well adds that she had the tact to affect ignorance of the things she knew “to such a point that in hearing her talk one would suppose that she spoke simply in the light of common sense

and from the habit of society." Let us note this trait: she was neither pretentious nor pedantic.

According to the testimony of her friends, she liked to surround herself with animated lively people. Witty and caustic, she did not dislike teasing and practical joking. For all that, she was kind—forthcoming, welcoming, flattering—perhaps almost too much so. She insisted that everyone about her must exercise courtesy, which is a form of charity. Of this she made such a point, says Segrais, that "she taught politeness to all the people of her times who associated with her." And this, too, is a point to remember. Then she was generous, she would say that to give is not a King's pleasure, as is proverbial, but God's pleasure. With these united qualities, she inspired many faithful affections which made the fortune of her house. "No one," says Tallemant, "was more loved even by her servants and the servants of her friends," who never gave her any other name than "*La Grande Marquise*".

As we have said, she was no pedant. Nor had she any literary aspiration; indeed, in a note to Godeau on 26th June, 1642, she confesses that she does not make verses because she has no familiarity with the Muses. We have several of her letters, and

they are not particularly well-expressed. But she had artistic tastes, as we have seen in wandering through her house. And above all she knew how to organize her receptions admirably.

As literature was among the entertainments of her receptions, she could not prevent the poets from speaking of love-making, and had to accept the liberties that were authorized by the customs of the age; but she never allowed allusions to herself to pass a certain limit, and contrived that this should very soon become known. "No one was ever wanting in respect towards her," writes the author of *Le Grand Cyrus*. It is to her honour, and we like her for it. And what we like her for even more is that under her charming liveliness she hid a profound sadness! She admits it in the epitaph that she composed, and that Ménage has preserved for us in a commentary on the poems of Malherbe:

*"Here lies Arthenice, freed from the severity
With which Fate has always pursued her.
O Passer-by, if thou wilt count her misfortunes,
Thou needest only count the days of her life!"*

Whence this bitterness? Was it caused by her health, which was always delicate and as Chapelain expresses it, "fort languissante"? She had seven

children, but lost one son at the age of seven, and another at thirty, killed in action after having committed a host of follies. Three of her daughters became nuns, a fourth married late, and the youngest, who married the Comte de Grignan, was the only one who had a tolerably happy lot. Did all these maternal disappointments, joined to her fragile health sadden her to this extent? Or was financial anxiety a too constant care? For, if the Marquis had received a handsome fortune, he had also inherited a great many debts and lawsuits; and he conscientiously employed his life in increasing both. His wife, who loved him, after vainly trying to prevent him, let him do what he would; and after his death she had the greatest difficulty in setting his affairs in order. And her two daughters, her heiresses, in their turn had a heavy inheritance of debts to liquidate. Creditors, bailiffs, stewards gave a great deal of trouble to the Marquise. In short, as is frequently the case with nervous, delicate natures, Mme de Rambouillet concealed a disillusioned melancholy under her sprightly worldliness. And we may wonder how, with delicate health and many pre-occupations, she sustained so bravely and for so many years the weight of hospitalities that were as numerous as they were brilliantly successful. The

answer is that she had with her someone who shared the burden and the honours of her successes—her daughter, Julie d'Angennes.

There is a portrait of Julie d'Angennes by Mignard in the Spencer collection. Tallemant wrote of her: "There has rarely been a person whose beauty was more generally sung, and yet she never was a beauty." Looking at this picture, we admit that he seems to have been right. When we gaze at that long face with its high forehead and hooked nose, its nut-cracker chin, thin lips and unsmiling mouth, at the large hands, heavy limbs and thick-set figure (the very opposite of her mother who was so supple and graceful) it is not easy to understand the enthusiasm of which Mlle de Rambouillet was the object, and we ask ourselves how she attracted so much homage. We must suppose that when animated she became more pleasing, and we are told that she had a pretty complexion and that she danced beautifully.

Such persons as Segrais and Mme de Motteville are not indulgent towards her. They write that she was haughty and scornful and lacked her mother's great kindness. Mme de Motteville adds that she showed herself to be what we should now call a snob. And then Julie d'Angennes loved to tease,

Julie d'Angennes



Photo: Bulloz.

JULIE D'ANGENNES

From a Portrait in Comtesse Robert de Vogüé's Collection.



and at certain moments seemed almost spiteful. If she had so much success, if she was to such a degree surrounded, flattered by odes and poems, overwhelmed with admirers, something must, no doubt, be set down to the poet's licence and something to a tribute paid by the guests of a house whose mistress was not accessible. But it may be, too, that Mlle de Rambouillet knew how to flirt and to feign her mother's best qualities. Tallement affirms that, when she liked, she could be "gay, affectionate, witty and kind," and that she was "a very lovable person." We may take it that she had her moods.

To her honour be it said that she knew how to excite faithful friendships, for instance, that of the Duchess of Aiguillon, niece of Cardinal Richelieu. Mme d'Aiguillon, who was on the best terms with her, induced Julie d'Angennes to attend the tableaux, comedies and suppers got up by Richelieu at his own house. So Mlle de Rambouillet used to dance at the Cardinal's ballets, and Mme d'Aiguillon invited her to spend some days with herself and her friend, Mme de Vigean, at Richelieu's château in Poitou. There was, evidently, a shade of maternal protection in this friendship, but its long duration does honour to her who was its object.

Now let us consider the receptions. They began very early in the century, soon after the death of Henri IV in 1610; for Malherbe, in a letter to Peiresc dated September 6, 1613, shows us that Mme de Rambouillet received at that date; but their zenith was towards the close of the reign of Louis XIII, from 1638 to 1642. People preferred to go to Mme de Rambouillet after dinner, at what M. de Rambouillet described ironically as "the hours of digestion". Thus a small domestic staff sufficed for the service—eight persons in all, mostly Italians.

In these assemblies the guests talked, recited, acted plays with Chapelain, Vaugelas, Arnault, Gombauld for actors. There was music, and at least one young lady shone whose beautiful voice made her the height of fashion under Louis XIII. She was a Mlle Paulet, daughter of a secretary of the King's Chamber, the first contractor for a tax levied on magistrates. "La Paulette," as Mlle Paulet was called, was a lively, pretty young person, with a graceful figure, golden hair, and a queenly carriage; she was a marvellous dancer and so wonderful a performer on the lute, so sweet a singer, that we are assured that on one occasion after she had been persuaded to sing for a long time two nightingales were found dead under the windows.

The poor birds no doubt had died of jealousy! Although the young girl's reputation was not unspotted, Mme de Rambouillet had welcomed her and made her her friend, and thanks to the Hôtel de Rambouillet, Mlle Paulet was received everywhere.

A game that was often played at these receptions was that of little literary improvisations. The guests made up roundelays or riddles. Conrart's miscellanies in the Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal have kept a quantity of these papers, which add nothing to the lustre of French literature. The Abbé Cottin excelled at such inventions.

From time to time some especial fête was organized, none more famous than that given in 1625 to receive the Duke of Buckingham, who had come to Paris for the marriage of the King of England with one of the daughters of Henri IV, and who was among those who wished to hear Mlle Paulet sing.

Mlle Scudéry tells us that Mme de Rambouillet had been shocked by the mob that had constituted the receptions at the Louvre under Henry IV when the guests were literally crushed. She insisted that order must reign in her house, and that the guests should not be too numerous for the rooms:

no one must be jostled and, above all, nothing must be broken, for she was anxious that everything should remain intact and in its place: knick-knacks, lamps, baskets of flowers. She presided over everything with perfect art, and though, as we have already said, it was difficult for her to prevent her guests from discussing the sentimental subjects that filled the novels of the times, though the men of letters who frequented her house thought it incumbent on them to make endless eulogistic verses in which they ventured many rather risky words enfolding the mother and the daughter in an atmosphere of gallantry and flirtation, she arranged that all that should be confined to the domain of literature. *Ménage* remarked truly, "at the Rambouillets' there is a great deal of gallantry but no love-making," a fact learned by *Voiture* to his cost the day he tried to kiss *Julie d'Angennes'* arm and she put him in his place in a manner that removed any idea of repeating the adventure. "Never was there a lady who understood sweet speeches so well and sweethearts so badly," was his disconsolate reflection. But this did not suffice to prevent slander from attacking the daughter in default of the mother, and we have rhymes that do not spare her reputation.

In conversation Mme de Rambouillet was a great stickler for the proprieties and a purist in language. She would not tolerate the use of certain words. As regards some of these, which were very coarse, we are entirely with her: but as to others it is debatable. Thus Mme de Rambouillet could not endure archaic expressions, nor queer provincial locutions, nor obscure technical terms. As these words have now disappeared from the language, we are bound to admit that events have justified her objection, which was the outcome of the conversations between learned men and men of the world to which she listened every day. For the scholars of that age were much interested in the problems of language; their correspondence is filled with the exchange of views as to the exact sense of certain words or the use of certain terms. For instance, in the *Entretiens de Voiture et de Costar* we see the latter ask whether it be correct to write *courir* or *courre*, *procure* or *donaison* (one just as bad as the other replies the correspondent), *recouvert* or *recouvré*. (Both correct is the reply, but with different meanings.)

These scholars and critics having set the fashion of purifying the language, it was they who condemned old-fashioned terms and thus impoverished

the vocabulary. The mode spread everywhere: Mme de Rambouillet followed it partly from personal taste and partly to give life and interest to the talk about her. But she followed a fashion: she did not create it. And in truth she was far from attaining the end she desired. In Conrart's miscellanies there are many lines composed in her salons and debated by her guests that could not be reprinted now without offence. Was not Julie d'Angennes obliged to recall certain authors to the proprieties severely—a strange office for a young girl! If Mme de Rambouillet had so much trouble on this account, it was because the people she received belonged to a generation only just emerging from the epoch of civil wars when manners had been extraordinarily rough.

It is said that the theory of a "Salon" is the art of grouping together illustrious and distinguished people, pretty women and men who talk well. To realize this ideal, Mme de Rambouillet took pains to gather about her the world of fashion and the Court. These were her illustrious and distinguished guests, and to provide the category of pretty women she united about her a charming group of girls of the best families who, with their grace and their freshness would create an atmosphere of charm and

liveliness: here were Marguerite de Rohan, Anne and Marthe de Vigeon, Anne de Bourbon, the future Duchesse de Longueville de la Fronde, Isabelle and Marie Louise de Montmorency, Mlle de Brienne, and others. Round them were gathered the young men from the Court, the Colignys, the Chabots, Saint-Maigrin, Roquelaure, Laval-Bois Dauphin, and behind them were ranged the fathers and mothers. Thus the most illustrious names of France were to be found at Mme de Rambouillet's—the Dukes of Bellegrade, de la Trémoille, de Schomberg, d'Aumont, the Marquis de Liancourt, the Marshals de Saint-Luc, de Saint-Géran and Bassompierre; cardinals such as La Valette, such bishops as Cospéan: titled ladies: the princesse de Conti, the Duchesse de Rohan, the Marquise de Clermont, the Comtesse de Moret, Madame de Sablé and how many others—it would be a very long list.

As for the brilliant talkers, they were provided by the men of letters: and it was they who were the most attracted by Mme de Rambouillet. They came in crowds, beginning with the members of the budding French Academy. There were many others, too, but unluckily a great number of those flicked by Boileau's cutting pen. The best name is that of Malherbe who was assiduous in the early

days. He fell in love with Mme de Rambouillet, addressed many poetic declarations to her and, like everyone else, was obliged to remain distant and respectful.

And then, there were Vaugelas and the Scudérys—Georges and Madeleine, Demarets de Saint-Sorlin, the author of the "*Visionnaires*," who read his work in the Salons of the rue Saint-Thomas-du-Louvre; Balzac, who alluded to the house as "this beautiful quarter of the globe" and averred that one day in the Hôtel de Rambouillet was better than centuries elsewhere—praise that, beyond all doubt, was excessive! But was not even he more measured than Chapelain who protested that Mme and Mlle de Rambouillet were women "of another species, distinct from all others and of a superior order just as there are angels of various hierarchies and phoenixes among birds"! There were those, too, who proclaimed the Hôtel de Rambouillet "a great world purified," "the temple of the Muses, of honour and of virtue": "the home of wisdom and knowledge——" this last a definition by Conrart who was a constant guest, as were Ménage, La Mesnardière, Costar, Saint-Amand, Benserade and Saint-Pavin.

But the three great favourites who imposed their

tone upon the literary people who made the house famous were Voiture, Godeau and Chapelain.

Voiture, presented to Mme de Rambouillet in 1625 by Chaudebonne, was the son of a wholesale wine merchant at Amiens. Not very distinguished looking, small, fragile with commonplace features, subject to catarrh, very well dressed. Tallemant tells us that he possessed any amount of go, wit and liveliness, but the meaning attached to the words in the seventeenth century is, perhaps, not entirely ours. Unfortunately, he was of a moody, uncertain temper, often taciturn, dreamy and permitting himself a liberty of expression when talking to courtiers that amused other people. Mme de Rambouillet and her friends liked him extremely: to quote Tallemant again, "He was the joy of these illustrious personages." He was the type of the wit of the period, knowing how to say all sorts of things "galamment": another contemporary tells us that he was "the father of ingenious chaffing," rightly adding, "It is true that one must look for nothing more, for his earnestness is not worth consideration."

During his intimacy with the d'Angennes, Voiture came to live in the Rue Saint-Thomas-du-Louvre opposite the Hôtel de Rambouillet: and

ended by taking his meals there every day, thus becoming a sort of parasite, although he was well-to-do, for he had three small charges from the Court and a pension of first clerk of Finance.

He was the great man of the house. His hosts swore by him. They praised his uncontested mastery in turning society verses and writing letters in a rare pedantic style. During the seventeenth century his works had an extraordinary vogue and ran through more than forty editions: they fell into complete neglect under Louis XV for the limpid genius of Voltaire dissipated their phantasmagoric success. He was the clever organizer of the literary entertainments of the house, of the readings and the games. He it was who revived the rondeau, the ballade, the triolet which had been more or less forgotten since the last century. And, after him everyone made rhymes and verses. This literature is absolutely unreadable to us, and some of his contemporaries, realizing the mediocrity of these productions, speak of them as doggerel and of their author as a poet in plaster.

Godeau was no less superficial. Full of fun and wit he had constituted himself the page and buffoon of Mlle de Rambouillet, and as he was small and plain he had, for his reward, been dubbed: "The

dwarf of Princess Julie". In 1637 he was designated Bishop of Grasse, and went into residence in his diocese whence he wrote letters that were passed from hand to hand at the Hôtel de Rambouillet and much admired, though they reveal nothing but an incorrigible futility.

Chapelain was introduced at Mme de Rambouillet's at the time of the siege of La Rochelle in 1627. Like Godeau, he was an ugly little man and Tallemant adds that he was "sale et crachottant" (dirty and much given to spitting). His letters, which have been published, are full of information about the house.

The day to which he looked for his greatest triumph was that on which he gave a reading of his famous *Pucelle*, and the ceremony, announced beforehand had attracted quite a crowd. But unfortunately his work was so tedious that the audience yawned: only one person was enraptured, Charles de Saint-Maur, Marquis de Montausier, whose appearance in the Hôtel de Rambouillet was an event of importance, for he ultimately married the daughter of the house, and by carrying her off gave the signal for the closing of a famous salon.

It is a strange thing that Mme de Rambouillet who received so many people could not succeed in

marrying her daughters: as we have already said, three of them became nuns, and Julie waited till she was thirty-eight before finding a suitable match. There had been talk of various proposals for her, notably from one M. de Gramont; but as the young man had not sufficient fortune to satisfy Julie's parents the project had fallen through. Then, one evening a certain Mme Aubry had brought Hector, Baron de Montausier, to the house. This aspirant, a member of an Angevine family, elegant, gracious, light-hearted, was quite to the girl's liking. But he was fickle, and looked elsewhere; moreover, his dreams of military glory infatuated him so that one day he set off for the Italian wars where he was killed in battle at Bormio. But he had a younger brother who, in due course, was presented to the Rambouillets, and he it was who admired the "Pucelle".

This young man was utterly unlike his brother: for he was exacting, surly, cross-tempered, a Huguenot full of austerity who disliked a laugh, saw faults in everyone and quarrelled with everybody; but he was a scholar, even a pedant, and a very worthy and most honourable man. So much so that he is said to have been Molière's model for the *Misanthrope*.

He had a large fortune and held lucrative posts, was said to have 114,000 livres revenue and lived ostentatiously, spending freely. Mme de Rambouillet made him welcome. He took root in her salons, where he liked to discuss philological curiosities with the learned. And although he let it be seen that he was rude and morose, everyone smiled on him. Then he took it into his head to fall in love with Julie d'Angennes, and a fine fuss he made about it!

With his ardent nature love became a violent passion. He could not eat. He could not sleep. He wept. Julie d'Angennes, rather bewildered by this rough tenderness, remained on the defensive, and Montausier sought to gain prestige by taking himself off to fight on the banks of the Rhine, and profitted by his absence to send her verses in which, under transparent fictions he ventured on indirect but pressing declarations. Julie d'Angennes besought Voiture to reply. In love with Mlle de Rambouillet himself (though in truth he was rather a playful, literary admirer), Voiture amused himself by composing ironical answers. Montausier renewed his onslaughts, and this time no one replied to him. Pestered with questions by her confidants, Julie protested that she had no wish to

marry. Montausier decided to wait, and he did wait—for thirteen years during which time he hated Voiture most cordially, and continued his courtship not knowing by what device to overcome the resistance of the beloved one. In 1640, he bethought him that a whole year of absence without a sign of life might soften her, and then, on May 22nd, 1641, he re-appeared and offered to Julie d'Angennes as a token of his feelings the offering that he had spent seven years in preparing with angelic patience—the celebrated chain of flowers known as *La Guirlande de Julie*.

This garland was a collection of poems in which the best minds of the age had collaborated and of which the text, transcribed by a well-known calligraphist, N. Jarry, was ornamented with flowers and wreaths painted by Nicolas Robert. There exist three copies of the book, one now in the possession of the Duchesse d'Uzès.

The garland included ninety-one poems, of which eighty-seven were madrigals, each on the subject of a flower: there were two sonnets and two epigrams. Twenty-four authors had contributed, and ten pieces were anonymous. Among the writers were Montausier with sixteen madrigals, Chapelain, Colletet, Godeau, Scudéry, Desmarets,



Photo: Bulloz.

THE MARQUISE DE SABLÉ.

From a Drawing by Dumonstier (Musée du Louvre).



Conrart, Tallemant des Réaux, Gombauld, le Père Lemoyne and the Marquis de Rambouillet. The day of the presentation was a festival at which Voiture was not present, and though everyone had been sworn to secrecy it is unlikely that Julie had not been informed what was in the wind. As might have been foreseen, she received the manifestation with olympian calm, and M. Montausier had his trouble for nothing.

The *Guirlande* made a great stir in the seventeenth century. It called forth the admiration of some people, others made fun of it and it evoked some sprightly epigrams. As for Montausier, the poor fellow went back to the war in Guébriant's army.

From afar he multiplied his entreaties through all his friends—Mlle Paulet, Mme de Sablé, Mme d'Aiguillon. Julie replied plainly that she had no taste for marriage though Mme Aiguillon, pleading Montausier's cause, insisted: "But my good girl, my good girl, there's nothing to equal it in God's sight. It gives devotion!" They induced the Queen, Anne of Austria, and Cardinal Mazarin to intervene, and at last, one evening, when Mme de Rambouillet let herself go and made a pathetic scene with her daughter, Julie was touched and

suddenly yielded. She asked only to await the return of M. de Montausier and he, dispensed by Turenne from remaining at the front, came home and the marriage took place.

At the contract Mlle de Rambouillet received the barony of Talmont worth 50,000 livres, the marquesate of Piscani which was worth 90,000, 30,000 livres' worth of jewels and 10,000 livres in ready money. The ceremony took place on July 3rd, 1645, at the château of Rueil, on the invitation of Mme d'Aiguillon. Godeau hurried from Grasse to bless the union; four of the King's violins made music. But it was observed that M. de Montausier fumed and grumbled the whole day long.

The pair were destined to have a brilliant career. M. de Montausier was made Duke in 1664 and governor of a great many districts, Saintonge, Alsace, Normandy: he was first gentleman of the Chamber, and governor of the Dauphin, while Julie became Lady of Honour to Queen Marie-Thérèse and governess to the eldest son of Louis XIV.

But her marriage marked the end of Hôtel de Rambouillet: she did not get on very well with her husband and her health was tried by the birth of a daughter and two sons who did not live. So little

by little she forsook her mother's receptions. And then, in the same year as her marriage, her brother the Marquis of Piscani, who had gone to Germany, was killed in the battle of Nordlingen. She did not deplore it for she did not care much for him, and perhaps in reality, she did not greatly love anyone; but it plunged her mother, Mme de Rambouillet, into a deep despair.

And she was no longer young—sixty-three. Her health no longer gave her strength to support the fatigue of receiving. The death of her son did for her: she withdrew into herself: would no longer hear talk of fêtes and sought refuge in devotion.

A distressing adventure brought discredit on her house. Voiture and Chavarocche fought a duel in her garden over a light woman whom they were both running after. Voiture received a gash in the thigh to the intense amusement of Paris. Songs were made over it: Voiture was obliged to leave the house, and he never returned to it. The customary visitors became less assiduous, and the troubles of the Fronde finally dispersed them. M. de Rambouillet had become gouty and his wife more and more of a recluse.

The husband died at Paris in February, 1652, and was buried at Rambouillet, leaving liabilities to the

amount of 600,000 livres. His wife survived him for thirteen years, passing away in her turn in December, 1665, at seventy-seven years of age. Tallemant sketches her for us as a little old lady with a shaking head, but preserving a pretty complexion and a certain charm in spite of the rouge that she put on her lips—a practice severely criticized by her family. Then, too, she still had all her wits about her and her memory was perfect; in a word, “*n’ayant rien de dégoûtant*”, nothing repulsive. She was buried with the Carmelites in the Rue Saint-Jacques. Her house, which became the property of her son-in-law Montausier, passed into the possession of his granddaughter and became l’Hôtel de Crussol, and was pulled down in the early nineteenth century to be replaced by a theatre, burnt down in 1836. On the site, in the present day, is the Ministry of Finance.

To conclude: the men of letters who frequented the Hôtel de Rambouillet during the seventeenth century were nearly all, with the exception of Malherbe, writers of the second or third class. Molière could not have known the Hôtel de Rambouillet, for its salons were closed before his appearance. Corneille came for a short while but without success; his *Cid* had been admired there,

but his *Polyeucte* was criticized, and the great poet (who was not forbearing) did not forgive it. For that matter he was not liked in the Rue-Saint-Thomas-du-Louvre, perhaps because of his unpolished manners and exacting temper. Bossuet made a brief appearance there, taken by Arnould one evening when he was only sixteen to improvise the little sermon of which Voiture said, "I have never heard a sermon preached so early and so late." But except these two names not one of the great writers of the seventeenth century ever attended those famous assemblies. And so what influence could the salon have exercised upon them?

The truth is that those who have magnified this influence—Roederer, Cousin, Livet, were under an illusion. The great movement of the seventeenth century, which led to the refinement of the language and of manners, was general. Consciously or unconsciously everybody worked at it. But it is no more to the point to ascribe the honours of the movement to the mistress of the house who received a certain number of grammarians and connoisseurs in philology because she, like everybody else, was bitten by the fashion for expunging certain archaic and incorrect locutions from the language than it

would be to attribute the movement of contemporary literature to the famous salons of the nineteenth century because the leading representatives of that literature were constant visitors to them.

Nor, on the other hand, is it fair to reproach Mme de Rambouillet with the affectations and stiltedness that sprang from the movement of which we have been speaking. She was not the cause. Those same authors who frequented the house bore those causes within them and developed them outside the house and apart from it. When the Hôtel de Rambouillet was closed, Godeau, Chapelain, Conrart and their kind took refuge with Madeleine de Scudéry, and it was rather there, and in other meeting places of the same kind, that the *précieuses* at whom Molière so justly laughed, increased and multiplied. Catherine de Vivonne was entirely innocent of the exaggerations of style; she was no more able to prevent these than she would have been able to create the movement at its beginning.

But if Mme de Rambouillet's house had not the great influence that is commonly supposed upon manners and letters, it had a real effect in an unexpected quarter—I mean on the idea that posterity and history have formed the personality of Louis XIII and of Richelieu.

Mme de Rambouillet detested Louis XIII cordially: she hated him in an instinctive, unreasoning, almost physical way that was the more curious because Louis XIII had never harmed her in any degree. Tallemant, who was in his cousin's confidence—for she was his cousin—writes, "She could not endure him: he displeased her unaccountably, everything that he did seemed to her the contrary of propriety," and Mlle de Rambouillet said: "I fear that my mother's aversion for the King will lose her soul!" The result was that in conversations at her house there circulated much ill-natured gossip about the King with most far-fetched inventions, the most extravagant calumnies, and, owing to the fundamental coarseness of some of the *habitués*, even infamous suggestions. The Hôtel de Rambouillet was a centre of opposition to Louis XIII in every matter of importance throughout the reign.

Richelieu shared his master's fate. His reputation was not spared in the Rue Saint-Thomas-du-Louvre, where he appears never to have set foot. Of course, all the men of letters whose names we have cited loaded him ostensibly with praise, but they all trembled before him and all detested him.

Richelieu was not ignorant of the way he was

spoken of in that house, and the fact that he allowed his niece Mme d'Aiguillon to go there and to make the daughter of the hostess her friend, and that his almoner M. Mulot was free to go there too, might, perhaps, suggest that he did not care what was said about him. And yet, according to Segrais, he took the rather extraordinary step of inducing Boisrobert to ask Mme de Rambouillet "as a friend" to let him know who were those who spoke about him in the gatherings that took place in her house. Mme de Rambouillet is said to have replied cleverly that everyone who came to see her "was so fully persuaded of the esteem and friendship that she had for his Eminence, that there was not one who would venture to speak ill of him in her presence, and thus she would never have occasion to give him this information." The reply was diplomatic: there was no more to be said.

But Tallemant de Réaux noted everything that he heard said about Louis XIII and Richelieu in the Rue Saint-Thomas-du-Louvre: he has collected it all in his famous *Historiettes*, where he says: "It was from Mme de Rambouillet that I heard the greater and best part of what I have written in this book and of what I yet shall write there." And God knows if the King and his Minister got their

due! Tallemant's gossip has fed the novel and the stage: it has also provided subjects for several historians, and, with the delightful memory of the brilliant fêtes in the reign of Louis XIII, and the heaps of insipid verse in Conrart's *Miscellenies*, it is almost all that remains of the famous Hôtel de Rambouillet.

LOUIS BATIFFOL.

The Salon of Madame de la Sablière

ANDRÉ HALLAYS

THE SALON OF MADAME DE LA SABLIÈRE

MADAME DE LA SABLIÈRE was a pretty woman, witty and learned, without a shadow of pedantry; she was a good deal talked about; she had one great passion; she was converted and died repentant.

During the seventeenth century, a great many women were too charming, too witty, too affectionate. And many a life, like the life of Madame de la Sablière, ended in remorse and mortification. Unlike her friends, Mme de Sévigné and Mme de La Fayette, Mme de la Sablière has no literary fame to keep her memory green, and yet her name appears in every memoir of the period. Her faithful and devoted friendship for La Fontaine alone would have prevented her from being forgotten. Ah, here we have a man who did not mislead his benefactresses and friends when he promised them immortality!

Mme de la Sablière was born in Paris in 1640, but her family came from the Low Countries and belonged to the reformed religion. Her father, Gabriel Hessein, was a banker, and lived in the

Rue des Fossés-Saint-Germain-Auxerrois, quite near the church whose bells had tolled for the massacre of Saint Bartholomew. There he had founded Hessein-Nolleau's bank which did such fruitful business in saffron, diamonds and precious stones, and which, as a shareholder of the firm founded for the importation of "natron" (bicarbonate of soda), armed its own ships for the transport of this natron from Egypt to Marseilles. Gilbert Hessein had married a Menjot, one of the Menjots of Champagne, who also were a Huguenot family.

Having lost his wife, Hessein was eager to marry again, yet would not give his daughter Margaret a step-mother. So he hastened to wed her at fourteen years of age to Antoine de Rambouillet de la Sablière, son of a rich financier, Nicolas de Rambouillet; and he, too, was a Protestant.

(Let us avoid all confusion of names.) These Rambouillets have no connection whatever with the Rambouillets of the house of Angennes, of whom M. Louis Batiffol has just traced such a living portrait. Those Rambouillets belong to the most authentic nobility of France, whereas the father-in-law of Mme de la Sablière bore the family name of Rambouillet, and we do not know when or why he was ennobled. As for la Sablière, it was an



Photo: Bulloz.

MADAME DE LA SABLIERE.

From a Portrait in Comte Allard du Cholle's Collection.



estate in the neighbourhood of Chartres that the financier had acquired and baptized with that name, no doubt because it was sandy: and he had given it to his son Anthony.

With Mme de la Sablière we enter into that circle of Huguenot burgesses enriched by finance or trade who, during the early years of the reign of Louis XIV, led a quiet, prosperous life in Paris, while in many of the provinces their co-religionists were already subject to the annoyances and troubles that preceded the revocation of the Edict of Nantes. The great names of Schomberg and Turenne protected the Hesseins, Froments, Herwarths, Samuel Bernards and the Tallemants against the slightest breath of persecution. Fervent Calvinists, they observed all the practices of their religion, but their lives were devoid of austerity, and to their houses (the most sumptuous in Paris) they welcomed libertines with open arms.

According to Tallemant, who was one of Nicolas de Rambouillet's sons-in-law, the father of Antoine de la Sablière was *un franc nouveau riche* who could speak only of *my* and *mine*: he spoke of *my* green in speaking of the green in his garden, and *my* water, the water of his fountains. His house at Reuilly was one of the prettiest in the suburbs of

Paris. Situated between the Bercy and Charenton roads, it was famed for the beauty of its ribbon-borders and its walks bordered by hedges; the fruits of its orchard were so renowned that the King himself sent for them. The garden ended in a long terrace whence one could look down on the banks and course of the Seine. It was in this magnificent house that the ambassadors of the non-Catholic powers were received before making their entry into Paris. It is said that Nicolas de Rambouillet served as model for La Bruyère's "*amateur de tulipes*"; and his passion for bulbs was, no doubt, the most inoffensive craze of this pompous and rapacious financier.

He had had eleven children of whom Antoine, the second son, married Marguerite Hessein in the "*temple*" of Charenton on March 15th, 1654. His marriage portion was 150,000 livres and the bride's dowry 100,000 livres.

Antoine de la Sablière was handsome, very unsteady, and an elegant poet. Conrart named him "*le grand madrigalier français*" and, in truth he has celebrated all his amours in madrigals which are innumerable, and some of them are gracefully turned. He married Marguerite Hessein in the hope of forgetting a very loving mistress who had

shown herself too scrupulous for his approval. Whether or no he forgot this particular lady, he continued to madrigalize after marriage with so much zeal that there was discussion between the spouses, and after fourteen years of married life, Mme de la Sablière made a formal complaint against her husband and obtained a separation of habitation and property on the score of ill-treatment.

Let us leave M. de la Sablière to his madrigals for another ten years when, after the sudden death of a young girl with whom he was in love, he fell into a deep melancholy and succumbed to heart disease.

As for Mme de la Sablière, was she blameless? We must admit that at the time of the separation the three children were taken from her. Mme de Sévigné calls her the "turtle-dove" with hints that give us to understand that the turtle was not beyond the reach of slander. Charles de Sévigné relates how he met her at the house of a famous singer, Mlle de Raymond, and among the audience of this private concert he names Ninon de Lenclos and several other women whose adventures were notorious. . . . But all this does not prove much against her, for Mme de la Sablière was young, separated, romantic and charming.

She was intelligent and had a remarkable affinity for every kind of knowledge. On this point the witnesses are numerous and irrefutable. "She is a lady," says Bayle, "who knows things thoroughly, and who is known for an extraordinary mind." According to Corbinelli, the friend of Mme de Sévigné, she could compete with the learned abbess of Fontevrault, sister of Mme de Montespan, who translated Plato: "She understood Homer as we understand Virgil." She loved philosophy, studied physics, astronomy and mathematics. Above all, she truly appreciated poetry, since she showed La Fontaine the tenderest friendship and sheltered him in her house for twenty years; but she had nothing of a Philaminte. Her mind had "*man's beauty and woman's grace*". So says La Fontaine, and we may believe him, for we cannot imagine him enduring the society of a blue-stocking for twenty years!

There is but only one discordant voice, and that is Boileau's: in his tenth satire he draws this caricature:

*"Who presents herself first? Good! 'Tis this
learned dame*

Whom Roberval esteems and Sauveur frequents.

*Whence comes it that her eye is dim and her
complexion pale?*

*'Tis that with astrolabe in hand she has on her
roof*

Spent the whole night following Jupiter.

Beware not to disturb her. Science, I believe,

*Will be more than employed to keep her occu-
pied.*

*Of a new microscope they are about, in her
presence,*

To make experiment this afternoon at Dalancé's.

And then of a dead woman and her embryo

She must at Verney's witness the dissection.

Nothing escapes the gaze of our enquirer."

Now, some twenty years earlier, Mme de la Sablière and her friends had amused themselves one day at Boileau's expense for he, having taken it into his head to talk astronomy, about which he knew nothing—had changed the gender of the word *parallaxe* and had misunderstood the use of the word *astrolabe*. His rancour was tenacious, having kept the stone in his pocket twenty years, he had avenged himself in his own way. And a very mean revenge it was, for at the time that he was polishing these lines, poor Mme de la Sablière was

dying in what suffering and in what sentiments we shall hear by and by.

Was Mme de la Sablière pretty? That is a moot point: many of her contemporaries praised her beauty and her grace, but Mlle de Montpensier in her Memoirs reports that Rochefort said to her one day that Lauzun was going to see a little middle-class woman named Mme de la Sablière, who had had many lovers and had some still; that she was a peasant with strong passions who was very plain. But Mlle de Montpensier is not impartial: so great a lady was obliged to despise "little middle-class women" especially those who drew Lauzun to see them. Besides, Rochefort himself, who paid court to Mme de la Sablière, may not have been sorry to draw the wrath of Mlle de Montpensier upon Lauzun. In short, this testimony is not unexceptionable.

We know two portraits of Mme de la Sablière. One is in the Musée Carnavalet where she is portrayed in a rich full-dress toilette with the attributes of Diana—a dog, a bow and a little crescent-shaped diadem; the other is preserved in the Château de Bussy and shows a young woman walking swiftly through a park, a white veil thrown over her fair hair. In the Bussy portrait the features are less

marked, the eyes gentler; but the two paintings undoubtedly represent the same person, and that this person is Mme de la Sablière we cannot doubt if we refer to a certain "pen-portrait" which appeared in the *Mercure galant* of July, 1678. The gazetteer gives only the initials of his model but they are transparent: his model is Madame D.L.S. "She was of medium height but alert and perfectly proportioned. She had flaxen hair, the loveliest that can be imagined: the eyes blue, soft, expressive and bright altho' not of the largest; the shape of the face oval; complexion bright and smooth, the skin of dazzling whiteness; the loveliest hands and the loveliest throat in all the world. Add to these charms a certain winsome air of sweetness and enjoyment spread over all her person." The portrait is anonymous, but without improbability we might write under it Jean de La Fontaine, pinxit.

Such is the image that we keep of Mme de la Sablière, its date is 1678. The model was thirty-eight and her beauty shone with all the fires of Autumn and of passion. For the past year or more the talk of the Court and of the town had been her liaison with the Marquis de la Fare.

La Fare had good birth and charming manners. He had served against the Turks under La Feuill-

lade. A ladies' man and a fop, he had been among the earliest adorers of Mme de Montespan; but had prudently retired when he perceived that he was poaching on the King's preserves. Then he had paid court to Mme de Rochefort, but Louvois was besieging that stronghold and La Fare, having drawn the enmity of the all-powerful minister, had been obliged to sell his commission and leave the service. It was then that he inspired in Mme de la Sablière a passion that he shared—or pretended to share.

La Fare was not without social qualities. True, his society verses are only mediocre, but in his *Memoirs* he shows a just and discriminating political sense. Later on he was sunk in debauchery and drunkenness, but at thirty-three he still had charms to attract. And the "turtle-dove" adored him.

Society, always on the look out for scandal, spied upon the lovers and made bets as to who would weary first. To those who doubted the constancy of the fair Sablière, Charles de Sévigné replied: "No, no: she loves her dear Philadelphus: tenderness, passion, refinement and perfect fidelity are still in the fair one's heart and whosoever hath said the contrary hath lied."

Of the constancy of La Fare no one dared affirm so much. Mme de la Sablière herself was obliged to doubt it for La Fare was a gambler and La Fare was fickle.

Before telling the end of the story I want to introduce you into Mme de la Sablière's house and show you the men and women who frequented it.

In his "Causerie" on the Abbé de Chaulieu, Sainte-Beuve makes one of those remarks which shed a sudden light on the moral and literary history of a whole epoch: "There are two contemporaneous centuries of Louis XIV," says he, "the one is noble, majestic, prudent and well regulated to the point of rigidity, decent to solemnity, represented by the King in person, by his appointed orators and poets, by Bossuet, Racine, Boileau; there is another century which flows under it, so to say, just as a river flows under a wide bridge which leads from one Regency to the other, from that of the Queen Mother to that of Philip of Orleans. This transmission of the spirit of one Regency to the other was largely due to Mazarin's brilliant, beautiful nieces (the Duchesses of Mazarin, and of Bouillon) and their circle; Saint-Evremond and the epicures of his school, Ninon de Lenclos and those

she gathered around her, in short, the cavillers and scoffers of every party."

This stream has nothing in common with the Court of the Great King, nor has the charming "turtle-dove", the Huguenot banker's daughter, the woman separated from her husband, absorbed in science and philosophy, who receives Ninon, who does not try to hide her connection with La Fare, and who shelters under the roof the most impenitent of libertines. And does not the mixed assembly that gathers in her salon, (where fine gentlemen who come to pay their court to her rub elbows with savants, with drawing-room Abbés, with Acadamiciens, and even with such bohemians as are interested in novelty,) presage the easy manners and intercourse of the eighteenth century?

Madame de la Sablière lives in a mansion in the Rue Neuve des Petits-Champs. We do not know either the exterior nor the interior of this dwelling, but it must have been sumptuous and decorated in the taste of the time. We are reduced to saying with Molière "The scene is in Paris."

As for the queen of the house, we know her already. Still, the better to know her disposition and her tastes, let us cite some lines of La Fontaine. In the Prologue to the delightful Fable he has dedi-

cated to her : "The Raven, the Gazelle, the Tortoise and the Rat"—the poet tells of his dreams of raising a temple to Isis, and he traces the likeness of the goddess—it is Mme de la Sablière—whom he wished to enthrone in the sanctuary.

*Au fond du temple eût été son image,
Avec ses traits, son sourire, ses appas,
Son art de plaire et de n'y penser pas,
Ses agréments à qui tout rend hommage.
J'aurais fait voir à ses pieds des mortels
Et des héros, des demi-dieux encore,
Même des dieux : ce que le monde adore
Vient quelquefois parfumer ses autels.
J'eusse en ses yeux fait briller de son âme
Tous les trésors, quoique imparfaitement :
Car ce cœur vif, et tendre infiniment
Pour ses amis, et non point autrement,
Car cet esprit qui, né du firmament,
A beauté d'homme avec grâces de femme,
Ne se peut pas, comme on veut exprimer.
O vous Iris, qui savez tout charmer,
Qui savez plaire en un degré suprême,
Vous que l'on aime à l'égal de soi-même,
(Ceci soit dit sans nul soupçon d'amour,
Car c'est un mot banni de votre cour,*

*Laissons-le donc); agréez que ma Muse
Achève un jour cette ébauche confuse.**

What a charming portrait! And what an exquisite declaration of *friendship*! *Friendship*. We must weigh upon the word, for there has from time to time been misunderstanding as to the feeling that united the poet and his protectress.

It is he himself who, in the dedication of another of his fables, enlightens us as to the tone of the conversation in his friend's house:

*Propos, agréables commerces,
Où le hasard fournit cent matières diverses.*

* At the temple's shrine her image would have stood,
With her face, her smile and her attire.
Her art of pleasing without thinking of it,
The grace to which we all do homage.
I would have painted her, with mortals at her feet
And heroes too, and demi-gods.
Aye! even gods. What the world adores
From time to time offers perfume at its altar
I would have shown—albeit imperfectly—her soul
With all its treasures shining in her eyes:
But this warm heart so infinitely soft
For Friendship and for nothing more,
This mind, born of the firmament,
Uniting manly beauty with the grace of woman,
Can't be described as one would wish.
O Isis, you who charm everything,
You who please in the supreme degree,
You whom one loves as one loves himself,
(Let this be said without a hint of Love,
For that's a word you've banished from your Court,
Leave it at that); and some day you'll allow
My Muse to finish this imperfect sketch.

*Jusque-là qu'en votre entretien
 La bagatelle à part; le monde n'en croit rien :
 Laissons le monde à sa croyance.
 La bagatelle, la science,
 Les chimères, le rien, tout est bon; je soutiens
 Qu'il faut de tout aux entretiens;
 C'est un parterre où Flore épand ses biens;
 Sur différentes fleurs, l'abeille s'y repose.
 Et fait du miel de toute chose.**

Who were the intimate guests in this house? First and foremost, Mme de la Sablière's own family, for it had remained faithful to her after the separation: there was her uncle Anthony, a Protestant of the old school, doctor, philosopher and theologian; her brother Pierre Hessein who lived under her roof, an intimate friend of Racine and Boileau, an unceasing talker, fearfully paradoxical, and so disputatious that, in Racine's words "we

* Talk, chat and pleasant intercourse,
 Where Chance provides a hundred subjects.
 But not a word the world believes
 Except the chit-chat! Let the world think what it will,
 And there *is* chit-chat,
 But there's science too,
 And Day-dreams. Nothing. Everything. All alike is good:
 We must have all things in our intercourse
 For 'tis a bed where Flora spreads her wares.
 On different flowers the bee alights
 And honey culls from all.

generally parted hoping not to see one another again for a week", but nevertheless a learned man and a gifted one.

Mme de la Sablière had good friends of her own sex who added to the attractiveness of her home:—Mme de Sévigné, Mme de La Fayette—it would be superfluous to describe those two or to discant on their merits; Mme. de Coulanges whom Mme de Sévigné nicknamed the *Leaf* because of her quivering sensibility; the *Sylph*, because of her elegant form and beautiful dancing; the *Whirlwind* because she hastened through life at lightning speed, and the *Fly* because Mme de Grignan had ascribed to her the fable of a fly who, perched on a carriage wheel exclaimed "Oh! what a dust I am raising". And these four definitions constitute an admirable portrait of the charming worldling, lively, witty, "on the spot" of whom the Abbé Gobelin said after hearing her general confession, "Every sin this lady commits is an epigram." Then, too, in the days when Mme Scarron was still merely the governess of Mme de Montespan's children, she was to be found at Mme de la Sablière's, and the youthful Mme de Lambert, already possessed of that reputation for steadiness and virtue which was such a marvel to her contemporaries. There were others

too (maybe less virtuous) such as Mme de Frennes who, carried off by the Chevalier de Lorraine, had had a son by him; and Mme de Suze (the last descendant of the Admiral de Coligny), who composed love songs, and on one occasion wrote to Christina of Sweden: "All the duty in the world is worth less than one fault committed through love."

And then there were people from the Court: Rochefort, of whom it had been whispered that the Turtle-dove had listened to his wooing: the Duc de Foix who, if Saint-Simon can be believed, never thought of anything except to "divert and amuse himself": the Comte de Brancas, one of Mme de Coulanges' admirers, a gentleman full of honour, of bravery and appearance, but who delighted every society by his priceless absent-mindedness (La Bruyère borrowed from him most of the characteristics of his *Ménalque*); and, finally, there was La Fare who, having left the service for the reasons you know of, posed as having sacrificed all to the love of la Sablière. But that sly minx, Mme de Coulanges, was not deceived by his assertions, and protested that this so-called passion was "laziness, and laziness, and again laziness." As for La Fare, when he was at Mme de la Sablière's, he behaved

as one who would have preferred to air his laziness elsewhere.

And there were diplomatists.

There was Barillon d'Amancourt, who had been ambassador in England and was a *bon vivant* of such incredible greediness that Saint-Evremond said of him that he had found a marvellous cure for plenitude: it sufficed him to talk half-an-hour about the low diet and austerities of the Trappists for the discourse to affect him like a fast. He was better fitted for social than for family life, and when he returned to Paris he exclaimed to Mme de Coulanges, "Ah! Madame! How I delight in your house! I shall come every evening when I have got tired of my family." "I shall expect you to-morrow," she replied, readily. Mme de la Sablière's house pleased him too, and La Fontaine, whom he met there, dedicated to him his Fable, "*Le Pouvoir des Fables*."

Another diplomatist was M. de Bonrepaux, who had been entrusted with several secret missions. He was a fat little man with a rather absurd-looking face and a rasping voice, but he spoke so well that Saint-Simon tells us that "Everyone had pleasure in learning of him and even in amusing himself with him."

The Abbé de Chaulieu, an ambitious epicurean, could not accept the injustices of Fate with philosophy. He had accompanied Louis XIV's ambassador, Bethune, to Sobieski's court in Poland, and had returned from the expedition covered with honours and filled with good stories about the good cheer and wassail cups of the Poles, their long beards, their vests of many colours and their immense sabres, and of how in Warsaw he had engaged four gentlemen at forty sols a week to serve him. . . . But he had expected that on his return he would be named Resident of the King of Poland in Paris, and the place had been given to another. Chaulieu consoled himself at Mme de la Sablière's by turning rhymes after supper to the glory of the Comte de Foix :

*Pour the wine, throw the roses,
Dreaming only of delight,
Time at his own hour discloses
What may be our future plight.*

Chaulieu is not the only drawing-room abbé we shall meet at Mme de la Sablière's. There was the Abbé La Chambre, famous for his epigrams and protected by his deafness against those made at his expense; and there was the Abbé Têtu, assiduous

in all salons, for he sought the company of ladies, amusing them with his anecdotes and stories and bewildering them by his flow of words, so that some jealous mute had nicknamed him *Têtu tais-toi*. He was devoured with ambition, but Louis XIV did not consider him "a sufficiently worthy man to be a guide to others." He paid court to Mme de Coulanges who made him put up with a good many mortifications.

Two very intelligent Jesuits were among Mme de la Sablière's most faithful guests—the Père Bouhours, nicknamed the starchy of the Muses because of his pompous affectation; and the Père Rapin, quite at home in a society wherein he ran no risk of meeting Jansenists.

And then there was all the troupe of writers and rhymsters, those who had been famous yesterday and those who would win renown to-morrow:—Pellisson, old Conrart, secretary of the Academy, Benserade, Chapelle (when he was not too tipsy to find his way to the rue Neuve-des-Petits-Champs), Charles Perrault, author of the immortal fairy tales, and young Fontenelle. Finally the savants—Delancé, du Verney, Roberval. After the death of Roberval, it was to Joseph Sauveur that Mme de la Sablière turned for direction in her mathematical

studies. Sauveur was as well-known in society as in the world of science, for he had put the rules of the game of basset into algebraic equations and by a calculation of probabilities had proved the advantage of the bank over the players. At that time the world had gone mad over basset; for basset wives robbed their husbands, and sons stripped their fathers: it was played at the Duke of Vendôme's and played at Court. And of all Mme de la Sablière's guests it must have been Sauveur whose conversation was most interesting to that confirmed gambler, La Fare.

One of the strangest persons in the household was François Bernier. A great traveller he, who knew all the East and had sojourned for years in India, where he had been the doctor of the Great Mogul. Now that he had returned to Paris, he renewed his ties with old friends and was intimate with Racine, with Boileau and with Molière, for whom he had shed some light on the medical profession. Philosophy was his passion, and he compiled a "Summary of the Philosophy of Gassendi" in eight volumes, for the use of Mme de la Sablière.

This Bernier was an epicure in practice as well as in theory. "I'm going to make you a confidence," he said to Saint-Evremond, "a confidence

that I would not make to Mme de la Sablière nor even to Mlle de Lenclos; but to you I will confess that I consider it a sin to abstain from pleasures." However, this opinion did not prevent him from defending spirituality, and Sainte-Beuve defines him as a Cartesian without knowing it; but he was essentially a sceptic. Like La Fontaine, with whom he must have lived in perfect harmony, he was lodged in the house in the Rue Neuve-des-Petits-Champs.

Whilst all these guests, so various in condition, tastes and character, are talking of the nature of the soul, of the rules of the game of basset, of the religions of India and China, or of the gossip of the Court, Town, and Academy, there sits a long-nosed man sunk deep in his easy chair with his eyes half closed and his wig a bit askew. From time to time he lifts his head and his glance lights with a passing flame when Perrault quotes some poet's lines, when La Fare and his friends describe a marvellous game of basset, or when a young musician plays a piece of Chambonière on the harpsichord, for La Fontaine's interests have not changed with the passage of years, and he still cares for "play, love, books and music". And then he falls back into his reverie.

He was fifty when he accepted Mme de la Sablière's hospitality. Sixteen years earlier, he had arrived from Château Thierry in the hope of gathering a few crumbs of the manna that the Superintendent Fouquet let fall on the wits who were willing to follow his taste and serve his fame. But the Superintendent had been arrested, and though La Fontaine had found admirable accents in which to deplore his disgrace there had been no more superintendent and no more pension, and La Fontaine had squandered all his substance. He had obtained a post of serving-gentleman to the Dowager Duchess of Orleans, but after a time she had died. What would then have become of the unlucky poet had Mme de la Sablière not welcomed him into her house? Mayhap he would have dragged out a miserable existence in taverns, drinking in the company of that sot, Chapelle, and his masterpieces might, perhaps, never have been written. For when he went to live in the Rue Neuve-des-Petits-Champs he had composed only a part of his works, *Adonis*, and *Clymène*, a few ballads and elegies, *Psyché*, some tales and the first six books of the *Fables*. The following six were all written after 1672, and it is in them that we find those great *Fables* that display all his genius:—*The Animals stricken with the*

Plague; the Milkmaid and the Milk Jug; The Cat, the Weazel and the little Rabbit; The Lion's Funeral; The Two Pigeons; The Two Friends; The Danube Peasant. In Mme de la Sablière's house he found a hospitality that respected his liberty, a friendship that exercised no tyranny, ample leisure, an assured morrow and (that which for him was always the greatest of all goods) freedom to dream at will—and he did dream.

He dreamed while Brancas and de Foix roared with laughter, while the hoarse voice of young Sauveur explained the propositions of Euclid, while Bernier described the ecstasies of the Fakirs, while Chaulieu related his adventures with the Sarmates, and Barillon harangued over the affairs of England.

He would be dreaming when suddenly Mme de la Sablière would call to him: "Monsieur de La Fontaine!"

He would go on dreaming, and then to rouse him from his reverie she and her friends, laughing, would begin to play a scene from the enchanting comedy of *Clymène* in which La Fontaine shows himself in the character of Acante and laughs at his own absent-mindedness.

Erato.

Acante !

Clio.

Do you think he'll reply to-day?
When deep and happy dreams
Control his mind, 'tis vain to speak to him.

Erato.

Though I should shout myself hoarse in calling him,
I'll make him hear ! Acante !

And at last the poet wakes and ends the line—
“ Who calls ? ”

And continuing the jest Mme de la Sablière goes on :—

'Tis your good friend Erato !

Acante.

What would she ?

Erato.

You shall be told—Come here. . . .

And Acante was told that what was asked of him was that he should recite one of his Tales or Fables. Everyone knew that he would protest that he had

no memory, and that M. Gache alone was able to satisfy the audience. This M. Gache was one of his best friends and knew by heart all the Tales and all the Fables. And here comes M. Gache, just at the right moment and he recites (as we can suppose without improbability) the charming lines to Isis. He may have recited, too, that admirable address to Mme de la Sablière at the end of the ninth volume, wherein the poet speaks with inimitable grace of the souls of animals. And these fair dames, these noble lords, these poets, men of science, men of letters, listen enchanted to the flowing verse in which the poet derides Descartes' theories on the automatic nature of animals. For the graceful art that turns the Fabulist's objections into such perfect word-painting as his description of the stratagems of the stag and the wiles of the partridge; the short digression that in a few splendid lines confesses the infirmity of human reason; the charming appositeness with which the fable of the *Two Rats*, the *Fox and the Egg* are introduced; and finally the ingenious and fantastic distinction between the two kinds of soul (who could expect a Fabulist to admit that animals have no soul?) that he substitutes for the cut-and-dried mechanism of Descartes' theories,—all these two other beauties—combine to make

the *Discours à Mme de la Sablière* one of the most perfect masterpieces of French poetry.

La Fontaine listened with no displeasure as his friend Gache recited his lines, for he loved applause, he liked to please, and he knew the value of his works. For that matter, once he was roused from his reverie he was another man: his face brightened, his eyes lit up, he had sudden bursts of enthusiasm. On such occasions, and especially at the supper table, he took part in every discussion.

These lively, learned, gatherings came to an end when Mme de la Sablière went into retreat for the expiation of her sins. La Fare had deserted her, but as regards this final chapter of her romance I shall content myself with citing the letter in which Mme de Sévigné tells her daughter how the rupture took place and what came of it:

“You ask me how the separation between La Fare and Mme de la Sablière came about: Will you believe it, basset was the cause! It is under that name that the infidelity was declared; aye, it was for the sake of that the prostitute basset that he fell from his religious worship. . . . To begin with, she noticed his indifference, his absences; she examined his bad excuses, his insincere explana-

tions, his pretexts, his embarrassed justifications, his strained conversations, his impatience to leave her, his excursions to Saint Germain where he played, his boredom, his not knowing what to say : in short, when she had carefully observed the eclipse that was in progress, and the foreign body that little by little was hiding all the brilliant love [an allusion to Mme de la Sablière's astronomical studies] she made up her mind. (I know not what it cost her.) And then, without any quarrel or reproach, without explosion, without turning him away, without explanation, without trying to humiliate him, she eclipsed herself. Without giving up her house—for she returns to it from time to time—without taking leave of the world, she discovers that she is so well off at the Incurables that she spends almost her whole life there, feeling thankful that her troubles are not like those of the patients she nurses. The Superiors of the place are under the charm of her spirit; she rules them all; her friends go to see her and she is as good company as ever. La Fare plays basset. ‘And the fight ends when there is none left to fight.’”

Was “this prostitute basset” alone to blame? When the cards had been too unkind to La Fare, he sought consolation with the actress Champmeslé,

at whose house he often met La Fontaine. One day it came to pass that the carriage in which he was seated with another consolatrice, upset just in front of Mme de la Sablière's door. And, to dismiss the personage, let us add that he died at the age of sixty-nine ruined by debauchery and riotous living.

Mme de la Sablière had already changed her faith. Father Rapin had been instrumental in her conversion, and it was no doubt he who, in the first instance, directed the conscience of the neophyte.

Mme de Sévigné has told us that her friend did not break with the world all at once, and, indeed, after having left the Rue Neuve-des-Petits-Champs, Mme de la Sablière took a handsome flat in the Rue St. Honoré near to the entrance of the Convent of the Feuillants: thither she moved her furniture, her household . . . and La Fontaine. But at the same time she engaged a little lodging within the walls of the hospital where she spent the greater part of her days waiting on the sick and serving the poor.

But this semi-retreat could not satisfy Mme de la Sablière for long. She now burned to offer up to God all the devotion she had once given to the

world. After the death of Fr. Rapin, who was probably far from urging her to extreme resolutions, she turned to the Abbé de Rancé, that great reformer of the Monastery of La Trappe, who had already guided so many troubled and tormented souls.

Extracts from her letters to de Rancé written during the last five years of her life have been published. How moving and how painful are these years of suffering, remorse, repentance and mortification! To shield herself from visits and from the gossip of society, to disappear more effectually from the world, Mme de la Sablière would no longer return to her flat in the Rue Saint Honoré, and took a little house quite near the Hospital for Incurables in which to hide herself. But her scruples followed and tormented her even there; she never ceased from asking Rancé whether she is obeying the Will of God. "In such convents as are to my taste," she says, "I should not survive for a week on account of the state of my health. . . . In those that I know and that are called the most regular, with their parlour and their recreations, I should die of distaste and tedium." And when Rancé asks her for what she wishes, she answers, "I don't know: I want to belong to God

as completely as I can, and what I have done so far is so little that it seems to me merely a privation from evil."

Nothing slaked her thirst for solitude and penitence. And yet she had cruel sufferings to endure. Not only was her health seriously impaired, but after the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes her Protestant family was dispersed, her son and one of her sons-in-law having chosen exile rather than abjuration.

Year by year, her life became more lonely and more hidden. She obeyed all Rancé's injunctions with an enthusiasm that recalls the fair Sablière of bygone days: "From the depths of my heart I beseech you to help me," she writes to this Director, "and I affirm to you that, in all truth, I do not think that God ever put into any heart such a feeling as He has put into mine for you. It is a thing that cannot be expressed in a letter, for to enable you to understand it I should need to tell you my whole life, and the impression that you have always, and at all times, made on me."

How well she was understood by the friend who, when asked what she was doing and thinking in her retirement answered: "*She has never thought, she only feels.*"

A few days before the Whitsuntide of 1692, the poor woman took note of a hard and painful nodule in her right breast and sent for the surgeon of the hospital. Her illness was incurable, and we find her confiding to Rancé.

“While I lived in the world I always dreaded this disease with all the horror that nature gives us of it. Since my conversion I have not once thought of it. When I took note of it, I threw myself down at the feet of Our Lord and with tears and great feeling I besought Him to take it from me or to grant me patience to endure it. And I can assure you that from that moment, I have not formed a wish about it, God having in His Mercy added to the peace that I had already, a calm that I cannot express. . . . What grieves me is a sort of indolence, it seems to me, sometimes—going to bed earlier, rising later. . . . In short, it is impossible (I note this at every moment) for my days not to be filled with broken resolutions. This is my one regret, and is not likely to end, for I greatly fear that I shall see the last of it only with the close of my life *whose memories make me tremble*.”

A few days before her death, she wrote this note to Rancé: “The illness that I have increases every day, my very Reverend Father. There is every

indication that I shall not go on long. Very humbly I entreat you that the illness I have may never be known to anyone, not after my death more than during my life. Without doubt God will reward you for all the good that you have done me. With all my heart I pray that it may be so. I continue to feel the same peace and the same rest, awaiting the fulfilling of God's Will towards me. I desire nothing but that, no other thing."

Cancer killed her, at the age of fifty-three on the 6th of January, 1693.

A few months before her death, she was visited by her old friend Mme de La Fayette, who, like herself, amid suffering and illness thought only of meriting the Divine Mercy. To Rancé, who had been instrumental in the conversion of the author of the *Princesse de Clèves*: Mme de la Sablière writes: "She is natural, and has a lovable turn of mind; *she goes to God through her heart.*" In truth it was the way followed by Mme de la Sablière herself.

And what about La Fontaine?

Well, when his friend had gone into retreat with the Incurables, the poet stayed on in her home in the Rue Saint Honoré. He had no taste for doing

penance, but he remained the true and scrupulous friend of his protectress. And when, one day, he sent his last-made verses to Racine, he begged him to show them to no one as they had not yet been read by Mme de la Sablière. But this did not suffice: he felt impelled to give a public testimony of his affection, and on the occasion of his Reception into the French Academy on May 2nd, 1684, he read for his inaugural address the famous "*Discours à Madame de la Sablière.*"

It was a rejoinder to the discourse of austere Abbé de la Chambre who, after extolling the poet's genius had addressed this solemn admonition to him: "Think that the very words that you have just uttered and that we shall inscribe on our register would be your condemnation at the Last Day if your deeds were at variance with them, and if you did not endeavour to unite purity of life and doctrine, purity of heart and mind with purity of style and of language which, if we weigh them rightly, are nothing without the rest." Not only was it a rejoinder to the austere Abbé, it was also La Fontaine's confession of faith; a simple, smiling, melancholy confession. Sincere, so far as it went, but without any real sense of sin or of the need for repentance, since, though he listens to a Voice which

accused him of versatility, of fickleness, of lightness, of too frequent change of style and manner, it cannot persuade him to abjure his *Contes*. He accuses himself of being a mere butterfly on the slopes of Parnassus—a creature blown about with every wind, but for all his eloquence of self-condemnation he does not promise to write no more *Contes*; he had made (and broken) that engagement so often that he knew too well the fragility of vows. He could not yet banish “foolish love and vain desire”; and the submission due to the Supreme Being will not trouble him seriously for eight years to come. Then, a few weeks after the death of Mme de la Sablière, he consented both to confess the errors of his life—a comparatively easy matter since there are repentances and resolutions that cost little to an old man, past seventy and at the point of death—and to publicly repudiate his *Contes*. This was a very different submission, and one that must have cost him much; for in all good faith he believed them innocent, and they were children of his Muse.

Despite her conversion, Mme de la Sablière had remained staunch in friendship. You have heard how sincere was her conversion, how fervent her piety, and thus you can measure the depth of the

affection she had bestowed on that old free-liver, La Fontaine. To the end of her life Rancé's penitent gave hospitality to the author of the *Contes*.

ANDRÉ HALLAYS.

The Salon of Madame de Tencin

PAUL REBOUX

THE SALON OF MADAME DE TENCIN

DO you like cherries? If so, I advise you to visit the Château de Tencin not far from Grenoble. It is surrounded by those admirable cherry-trees of which Stendhal speaks in his *Mémoires d'un Touriste*, and whose fruit is famous throughout the region.

Overhanging a gorge of the Alps of the Dauphinais, the manor of Tencin rises amid cherry orchards that in Spring-time look like a gathering of powdered wigs, while later in the season the cherries are ruddy and round as the lips of women in portraits of bye-gone days.

Such was the landscape in which was passed the childhood of Claudine Alexandrine de Tencin, daughter of a President of the Parliament of Grenoble.

Her father, for all that he belonged to the staid Magistrature was something of a philanderer, and her mother a coquette whose one thought was to please.

The four children born before little Claudine

Alexandrine were turbulent and noisy; not very well brought up. But for all that they made their way in the world.

One of her two sisters became Mme de Ferriol, a lady who did not spare trouble, for she had made up her mind to help the Regent to find all his favourites—so that her work was indeed cut out for her.

The other sister, Mme de Grolée, led rather a fast life and was witty only on the last day of it when, at the age of eighty-seven she made her confession before the family that were gathered piously around her bed: "I was young, and I was pretty. Men told me so and I believed them. Guess at the rest."

Of her two brothers, one inherited the paternal charge: he became a stock-jobber whose exploits fed the scandalous chronicles of the age. The other took Orders and was first an Abbé, then Archbishop and Cardinal. But what an Abbé! What an Archbishop! What a Cardinal!

Let us glance back on the last years of the century of Louis XIV, and take a seat at the family table in the big dining-room of the Château de Tencin.

There is the President thinking of lovely liti-

gants. And there is Mme la Présidente thinking of the dresses she has ordered in accordance with the latest Versailles fashion, so that the best dressed women of Grenoble may be consumed with envy. And there are the five children, all eager for the end of dinner that they may scamper about the woods.

Alexandrine, the youngest, as sharp as a needle, often glanced out of the window to see if a husband were not walking down the road. She dreamed of a noble lord, like the hero of the romances of chivalry, climbing the hillside and entering, hat in hand to claim the unique honour of being received into the family as a son-in-law.

Meanwhile, the President was asking himself what the deuce he could do with the little maid. As the youngest, she could have no share of the family fortune. And the cost of living was getting higher and higher. Just think, a couple of fowls cost thirty sous! It seemed to the over-charged President that the best means of avoiding trouble with a lively, pretty, flirtatious daughter of fifteen is to put her into a convent.

And so one day Alexandrine de Tencin learned the paternal decree. She was betrothed to the Lord for a purely spiritual marriage; and on the

next day was to become a novice in the Convent of Dominican nuns at Montfleury, and never again cross its threshold.

Ah! what tears she shed; how she entreated!

“Alas, father, don’t bury me alive! I feel that I could do honour to your house! Have mercy on me, papa! Don’t be my executioner! Oh, let my tears touch your heart!”

“Peace, my child! Begging and praying have no effect upon me.”

Between ourselves, the decision was, after all, less terrible than appeared on the face of it.

Let me recall to you the state of the convents during the last years of the reign of Louis XIV, who, having lived well for a number of years, had no further pre-occupation but to show forth the fruits of good living.

The convent in those days met a social need. It was the safeguard of the proprieties.

A widow pursued by her late husband’s creditors retired to a convent, just as in our days she crosses the frontier and takes refuge at Saint Moritz, Cairo, or St. Sebastien. When a prince was about to marry, all his lady friends were shut up in convents so that they could not trouble the dignity of the ceremonies.

The convent was a lodging, quiet, economical and comfortable. Ah! why have politics deprived us of convents? . . .

But if women fled from the world to cross a threshold surmounted by a sacred emblem, the world followed them if they were pretty—as pretty women have always been followed, in every time and place.

“To the Convent! To the Convent!” Thus severely spake paterfamilias when he wished to reduce an unruly or adventurous child, with the result that the convents were peopled with spirited young women who quickly transformed the refectory into a modish restaurant, the cloisters into gossip-shops and the parlour into a dancing room. Yes, yes, I assure you. . . . Dancing masters, singing masters, music masters were admitted into the convents. And the boarders did fancy-work: they made all kinds of confectionery—citron bread or crackers that were offered to amiable lords when they paid a visit.

A calm and silent sojourn? Not at all! Asylums of worldly education and profane pleasure with too hospitable wickets. The young novices let off fireworks amid the flowering bushes. They played private theatricals. They gravely debated the ques-

tion of the blue minuet and the pink minuet. The rule of Saint Dominic was less observed than that of Saint-Nitouche.

Often, even, a post-chaise stopped by night outside the convent wall, while a boarder let down a silken ladder. More than one ceremony of the clothing of a novice was interrupted by the incursion of a party of musketeers holding the abbess in check under the barrel of their pistol while they bore the novice to heaven long before her death by ways which were less those of the Lord than of Nature. . . .

It was in such a convent, the convent of Montfleury, that Alexandrine de Tencin was immured. There she lived the life of her companions, who made the Parlour the most popular Salon in the town, adorning the Chapel like a theatre, transforming the Mass into a concert, and giving the white robe and black mantle of the order so coquettish an adjustment that the great founder would scarce have recognized the habit.

The best society of Grenoble came constantly to enliven this un-austere retreat, but Mlle de Tencin could not adapt herself to confinement, and implored them to throw her down the terraces rather than compel her to remain a nun. She swallowed

an emetic to make herself ill and so bring about a change of residence, and on the eve of her profession took advantage of M. de Tencin's visit to send for a chambermaid, in whose presence she threw herself at her father's feet with sobs and tears. The proceeding was well thought out and gave her a good means of proving in the presence of a witness that she submitted to violence.

On the day following the taking of the veil, she sent for the lawyer of a neighbouring village to register her solemn protest. You may wonder how a lawyer could have been introduced into the convent for this end? Well, it was through the good offices of the Director of conscience whom the young Alexandrine had taken—aye, "taken" is the word, for the honest churchman, a great dullard, was more than half in love with his penitent without the least suspicion as to the nature of his feelings.

But M. de Tencin was inflexible, asserting that while he lived Alexandrine would remain in her convent. The poor girl then took matters into her own hands. She no longer opened her breviary and took only profane books to read during the services. Still better, she secularized her heart in the company of a Lieutenant-General, an Irish earl,

Arthur Dillon. . . . What was to be expected? She so longed to free herself from the monastic habit that she did not repulse the amiable gentleman, who was willing to help her if it were but for one single evening.

The most trustworthy chroniclers are agreed that a few months later the youthful Alexandrine was consumed by a desire to drink the waters of a distant health-resort. She obtained permission, but her illness was far from making her consume away.

Three years later, President de Tencin entered into his rest.

At last! . . .

We are now in 1708. But we find no trace of Alexandrine until 1711. What was she doing, where was she living all that time? I should be greatly puzzled to tell you. Where did she go? To whom? With whom? All is mystery.

So we find her in Paris in 1711, installed with her brother the Abbé, who was three years her senior and who had always loved her with all his heart. Their affection was reciprocal. We are even told that Mlle de Tencin strengthened the ties of blood by yet closer engagements, and loved the Abbé as tenderly as he loved her.

And yet the Abbé was a poor, foolish creature, ambitious and at the same time timid. He was a place-hunter seeking for patrons and protectors everywhere. But none had any regard for him because he could not make himself feared. He was of those who are kept waiting patiently in ante chambers the livelong day, talking to the porter at the gate, the footman in the hall, the secretary who had been sent to get rid of him. Then, after many useless bows, misplaced compliments, politenesses and empty flatteries, the poor petitioner went home, displeased, embittered, empty-handed.

Mademoiselle—or rather Madame de Tencin—for she was already twenty-eight and had several serious claims to the title of Madame—Mme de Tencin, then, was not at all disposed to allow her dear Abbé to cut so poor a figure in society.

She began by giving him good advice: "Talk less. Remember your dignity. Your silence ought to carry weight. You are a fine figure of a man. Acquire majesty. Appear beforehand what you wish to be. . . . Be persistent. Have faith in your star! Intrigue leads to everything, and when we have not the weapons we should like to have we must use those that are to hand. Many a forlorn hope has been realized, but never a forsaken one.

Do you want to be taken for a weakling, a simpleton, a rag? ”

Ah, the poor Abbé! His sister nagged and worried him. Thenceforth there was no more peace for him. In her hands he became a docile marionette.

The surest means of having influence in the world is to lay claim to it, and so soon as the Abbé de Tencin showed confidence in himself he inspired confidence in others. And no doubt this pair of schemers, the Abbé and the canoness—for she had her prebendary stall!—succeeded all the better because Mme de Tencin was still a handsome woman, with a long graceful throat, a largish mouth, fresh, mobile, expressive eyes, that, though indeterminate in colour, were sparkling and imperious while, according to Marivaux, her whole face was brightened by “the most nimble intellect that ever was.”

One day she said to the Abbé: “You must go to Rome so that I can be released from my vows by the Holy Father.”

Poor Abbé! Always bewildered, always hustled . . . he made the journey; and guided, stimulated, manœuvred by incessant letters, he obtained for his sister what she wished.

But she had not waited to be released by the Church before acting as a free woman.

The Chevalier Destouches could have told us something about that. He was an artillery officer, witty, sociable and gentle: a master-schemer, certainly a ladies' man, but for all that a gentleman. He was at this time forty-three years old, and in those days lovers had not yet acquired the years of supplementary credit. At forty-three there were grey hairs under the wig. At forty-three badly cared for teeth began to blacken and decay. At forty-three figures dilated by too copious repasts puffed out the flowered waistcoats. But still in 1711 Destouches was a fairly handsome man, well preserved, a good talker, a great eater, able to please women by every means they could wish. His age had even been of use in his courtship of the former nun, for she would not have consented to show too keen a pleasure in companionship incompatible with her recent condition. And of the reasonable loves of the Chevalier Destouches and Mme de Tencin, d'Alembert eventually was born. D'Alembert. Yes, d'Alembert!

But so soon as this son was born to her Mme de Tencin had him put on the steps of the church of Saint-Jean-le-Rond, whence he was rescued by the

wife of a glazier. Still the Encyclopædia is the issue of a Dominican canoress and an artillery officer.

Some people may be indignant in thinking of this extraordinary union, but I hasten to add that Mme de Tencin did all that was in her power to soften the scandal of her liaison. In order to avoid the accusation of having taken a lover, she took several. Nor must we forget that we are under the Regency, and must relate events as they occurred in those depraved, licentious days, if only to reflect a brighter lustre on the morals of the present time.

Through her sister, Mme de Ferriol, with whom she renewed contact in Paris, Mme de Tencin was at once in touch with all the highest society. Old M. de Ferriol was discreet, for he was deaf. He exacted only one thing: permission to retain his Molinist confessor. It was in Mme de Ferriol's drawing-room that Mme de Tencin first met the English poet and diplomatist Matthew Prior, courier of Lord Bolingbroke, who reproached him with neglecting old authors for young women. But Bolingbroke sent him honey-water, Spanish wine and rum to distribute, and the diplomatic talent of the poet was sorely tried in the division of these delicacies among so many ladies.

Then Madame de Tencin cast her net and drew in not only all the honey-water and Spanish wine and rum, but Prior too, and Bolingbroke after him when he came to Paris.

To Matthew Prior, who had the courtesy to die when his place was wanted for another, succeeded Marc René d'Argenson, lieutenant of police, whose functions and aspect were exceedingly austere. But a woman who has her way to make in the world has need to use tact in acquiring certain protections.

Like the climbing squirrel which Fouquet chose for his emblem, Mme de Tencin rose higher with every fall and we now see her the Regent's mistress.

Philippe d'Orleans, Regent of France, was a most charming man. Of an open disposition, he was easy of access, receiving petitioners, talking to them in his soft voice with an ease that nothing disturbed. He made all the business of the Government seem clear, and busied himself as successfully with politics, finance, history, the course of justice, war, art, mechanics as with the etiquette of the Court which was more complicated than all the other arts and sciences put together. Never did he forget either a name or a date. And never did he forget an injury. Yet he was not cruel. One could almost say that he was not cruel enough.

The forgiveness of injuries had become a sort of vice with him. There was for him such luxury in absolution that he surrounded himself with scoundrels for the sole pleasure of showing an astonished world the measure of his mildness.

And yet this man in whose sight no one was held culpable, this man whose indulgence was boundless, this prince who had no rigour either for others or for himself, was pitiless towards one crime, the crime committed by a woman when she meddles with any business other than the business of being pretty. In his own outspoken words, he "did not suffer a woman to talk politics between a pair of sheets". And when Mme de Tencin tried to entertain him with her personal ambitions and the ambitions of her brother the Abbé; when she tried to buy a benefit with a caress, the Regent repulsed her with his beautiful careless hand, and gave orders that his door was henceforth shut against the fair importunate.

Having lost her influence with the Regent, Mme de Tencin tried to win over his prime minister, Cardinal Dubois. Everyone knows with what zeal the Cardinal catered for the Regent's amusements. The son of an apothecary and himself a former underling, he had been well defined by "Madame",

the Regent's mother, as "a perfidious hound". Depraved, given over to women, wine and play, he contrived never to lose his heart, never to get drunk and never to lose at cards. He had been married in his youth to a peasant girl of the Limousin and had even sent a little money to his wife after he had left her. But how on earth can a bishop send help regularly to his wife? He cannot even be entered as a husband in the marriage registers. Dubois had a short way with inconvenient documents: he drank with the guardian of the register until the man was drunk. Then he tore out the page, and to the scrivener with whom the marriage contract was deposited he offered the choice of a bag of silver pieces or a dungeon without light or air. And the scrivener, not unnaturally, chose the money.

When, by these means Dubois had entirely detached himself from his wife, he wished to attach himself to the Pope and become a Cardinal. Passing from the violet robe of the bishop to the red hat, he scattered French gold so generously that his Cardinalate cost his country eight million francs.

This latest friend of Mme de Tencin, was not the sort of man likely to be in a lady's good graces. His intelligence was ordinary and his knowledge

merely such as is possessed by everyone. His voice was shrill, and his compliance could never be mistaken for gentle breeding. His sense of duty and of courtesy was such that he would burn all the letters brought to him and exclaim: "There, now they are all answered!" He had an unfeigned contempt for honesty and he mistrusted others as thoroughly as he felt they had a right to mistrust him. In fact, for all his phenomenal success in life, Dubois was merely a ferret-faced cad.

But those who want to climb must make concessions: and Mme de Tencin contrived to retain a certain dignity in her friendship with this worthless personage. She kept up appearances when she was most frivolous and safeguarded the proprieties when she gave cause for scandal. The truth is that love-making had no real importance in her mind, it was to her a mere accessory in a life devoted to ambition. Thus, by reducing the love that she inspired to a simple means and not an end, she rendered its conditions less intolerable.

It was, no doubt, to please Mme de Tencin that Dubois chose the Abbé her brother as the instrument for the conversion of Law.

We all know that this rascally genius fled from Scotland after a duel for which the laws of his

country condemned him to death, and that the inventor of stock-jobbing, like most of his compatriots, was a Protestant. But in the France of the Regency the clergy and the nobles at Court could not participate in the operations of a heretic stock-jobber, so Law, in complicity with Dubois, pretended to be a convert to Catholicism. And the Abbé de Tencin, egged on by his sister, was the accomplice of this farce.

We must add that Mme de Tencin was intimately mixed up with this affair of the Rue Quincampoix and that her house was the headquarters of Law's Bank. She was in truth a marvellous woman! Affairs of the heart, affairs of ambition, money matters, she kept them all abreast and managed them all light-heartedly, without rest, without fluster, without the slightest confusion, without ever saying "yes" to a business proposition when she saw no money in it, or "no" to the solicitation of an admirer whose suit seemed a good business proposition.

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Everything appeared to be going on as well as possible. Dubois died; old Cardinal Fleury showed an indulgent liking for Mme de Tencin, and the Abbé had been nominated Prince Archbishop of

Embrun. It was the apotheosis. And then, quite suddenly, everything went wrong.

The bad turn of affairs began with that unfortunate business of the suicide of La Fresnais.

La Fresnais was a giant over six foot high and a great man among the ladies.

In his capacity of forwarding agent and banker to the Court of Rome, he had been useful to Mme de Tencin when she sent money to her brother.

The big, simpleminded, strapping fellow had fallen in love with the energetic untiring woman whose favour turned his head a little. She had presented him to financiers and had initiated him into Law's stock-jobbing system. He and Mme de Tencin were partners in both business and pleasure for four years. But after a time each began to suspect that the other had cheated. Both were mistaken, and the truth is that his affairs and hers went wrong at the same time. But the good fellow was less skilful than his mistress; he speculated, lost what had remained to him, brought a law-suit and was non-suited. That spelt ruin, and when round his great body bailiffs buzzed like gad-flies, he completely lost his head. He called on Mme de Tencin, who refused to receive him, and he gained nothing when he entreated, threatened, sobbed.

For she was not the woman to be moved or intimidated by tears. And then the great fellow became neurasthenic and persuaded himself that Mme de Tencin, after having beggared him, meant to murder him, and to avoid this he forthwith went and killed himself in her house, leaving a Will to explain all the circumstances of his misfortune and charging his friend with the darkest designs. In the legal procedure of the time such a Will had the force of a denunciation, and passed from the Supreme Court to the Criminal Record Office of the Châtelet. But these two administrations were at daggers drawn, and Mme de Tencin was quite beside the question. The litigious point to settle was whether the Will belonged to the Supreme Council or the Criminal Court. The Supreme Council sealed up the doors of the Deceased. The Criminal Court placed other seals above those of the Supreme Council. The Criminal Lieutenant, enchanted to have such an interesting mission, was despatched to the domicile of Mme de Tencin, where, without further investigation he arrested her in the middle of the night, though she was ill. (And what wonder!) He conveyed her to the Châtelet, where she was confronted with the corpse of the unhappy Fresnais extracted from the quick-lime in

which it had already been burning for two days. For seven hours they questioned the prisoner though she was in a high fever. They compelled her to admit her debaucheries and covered her with reproaches and humiliations. And then they confined her in a dungeon infested with rats.

Law? Justice? What could be expected of magistrates who at last held a woman whose strength had often been measured against theirs, and who by her intervention had often compelled them to renounce some attractive enquiry? So, now that they held her, they held her tight.

But, two days later, the negotiations of her family had their effect, and she obtained the best that she could hope for—she was removed to the Bastille.

She entered it almost at the same time as Voltaire, whom she hated and who hated her, and who referring to the incident wrote: "We were like Pyramus and Thisbe—only we didn't kiss one another through the crack in the wall."

Compared to the dungeon she had left, the sojourn in the Bastille seemed almost pleasant to Mme de Tencin. She had her waiting-woman, and she took walks on the towers and in the gardens of the fortress. She transformed her chamber into a

drawing-room where she received visits, and even contrived that her three months' imprisonment should be lightened by a few excursions into the streets of Paris.

And then came an order from the King directing the Governor to release Mme de Tencin so soon as her case had been judged, a command that told the judges clearly the verdict that was expected of them. So Mme de Tencin came out of prison acquitted, legally enriched by the succession of her victim, and washed by the *Grand Conseil* of any stains that this story might have left on her reputation. A stay at the Spa of Passy completed the whitewash, and she re-entered the world with just enough illness to make her interesting.

But when she rose from her bed and beheld herself in the glass she saw that she must change her tactics. At forty-five, when fat begins to blur the outline, superannuation is near.

Some change in her way of life she must make: as she could not be devout she resolved to be witty. So from henceforth we have done with those affairs of love and money whose course we may follow in detail in the pages of M. Maurice Masson's brilliant book. We are now come to the history of a Salon which has retained all its prestige

from the eighteenth century to our own day. But let us not for one instant imagine that this salon was a haven of refuge in which Mme de Tencin brought her storm-tossed bark to port in stagnant waters.

Far from that! For, in the first place this salon was a headquarters of the Jesuits. Cardinals and archbishops met there secretly by night. And M. de Verdun, Bishop of Marseilles, whom his adversaries styled a "poor idiot", allowed himself to be disguised like a lover in a cavalier's dress with a black mask to participate in the privy council of the Rue Saint Honoré!

As these pious excitements annoyed the Court extremely, Mme de Tencin was ordered to withdraw to a distance of twenty leagues from Paris; but after she had gone four leagues she protested violently to her well-wisher Cardinal Fleury. The old minister, patient and courteous, was not her dupe; but it was not possible to his gentle soul to vex anyone. So he granted his petitioner the right of returning to Paris. She saw at once how she could make sure of remaining there and busied herself with the love-affairs of Louis XV.

She began by preparing the rise of Mme de Mailly, a kind, tender-hearted creature who

cherished the King and could ask nothing of him. Indeed, when she saw that her sister, Mme de Vintimille, was loved by him, she eclipsed herself till Mme de Vintimille died suddenly, when Mme de Mailly mingled her tears with the King's and consoled him submissively.

But in time the King wearied of a mistress who had never been beautiful, whom he had had too long, and who was no longer young. So we find Mme de Tencin in quest of a successor who must be her creature in order that Monseigneur the Archbishop Tencin can be imposed on the King as a minister!

She took an accomplice in the person of the Marshal Richelieu, that brave, witty, ignorant, bold, licentious and charming gentleman whom she called "my pussy Richelieu", and of whom she had, of course, at one time been the mistress. In agreement with him she proposed to the King as his future favourite the youngest sister of Mme de Mailly, the Marquise de Tournelle.

Of this large family of girls there were still two, the Duchesse de Lauraguais and the Marquise de Flavacourt, who had not been employed for the King. Mme de Tencin kept them in reserve, for one never knows what may happen. . . . But as it

is always wise to have two strings to one's bow and experience had taught Mme de Tencin the prudence of betting on the double event, she at the same time encouraged the good offices of little Madame Poisson, the future Marquise de Pompadour. She gave out that she was young Mme Poisson's god-mother and that she had made her her friend, while to her protégée she hinted the part she was to play, and prepared her débuts.

These numerous love intrigues, great and small, did not exhaust the activities of Mme de Tencin, who was always at work, always striving, who knew no rest. She haunted the financiers, the men of war, the men of law, patronizing this one, intriguing against that other. If the telephone had been in existence, she would have assuredly driven the central office mad! As it was, she had herself carried in a Sedan chair now to the Louvre, now to the Comédie, now to some ministry—and wrote in her mornings a score of letters whose delivery ran several footmen off their legs. She arranged a marriage for this person, a separation for that; she had counsellors appointed or benefices bestowed; she drew up petitions and she wrote novels that had a great deal of success in their day, though they were not of much value. . . .



Photo: Bulloz.

THE MARQUISE DE TENCIN.

From a Portrait attributed to Aved (Musée de Valenciennes).



And this woman whose cupidity incited her to covet everything and grasp everything had no equal as a hostess! Every Tuesday the same seven persons nick-named the seven sages, dined with her in her flat near the Church of the Oratoire in the Rue Saint Honoré, and after dinner the doors opened to admit persons less favoured but often more august. To be received by Mme de Tencin was to acquire a patent of intellectual elegance, and no philosopher from Geneva, no English gentleman, no German poet passed through Paris without longing to be admitted into this sanctuary of French intelligence.

Modestly dressed, plump, a lace cap resting on her powdered hair, the mistress of the house was attired with a simplicity that was not unstudied.

The house was furnished with comfort but without luxury or even refinement. It was decent but austere, as becomes an intellectual centre, and the respectability of the learned guests was the equivalent of a moral rehabilitation. No such prestige would have been conferred by the painted and gilded apartment of a rich farmer-general as was derived from this dwelling, as nobly modest as the seats of the French Academy. Here one met constantly the aged Fontenelle, precise, prim, neatly

dressed with his wide fair wig, light-coloured coat, and waistcoat of cloth of gold; Fontenelle, whom she kept a prisoner lest he should wet his feet when the floods were out at Christmas time of 1740. She kept him in the Salon and for bed and board until New Year's Day, when she restored to the old lawyer his liberty, "a thing" he wrote gallantly, "with which I dispensed very happily."

And there was that good creature Motte, crippled with rheumatism and warming himself under his great red cloak.

There, too, was the Abbé Prévost, author of *Manon Lescaut*, a clerk in minor orders not without regrets for the soldier's uniform.

There, too, was Marivaux—absent-minded, elegant, crumbling away his wit as he had crumbled his fortune—refining and polishing every subject, talkative, sensitive and ingenious.

There was Dr. Astruc, a bubbling Southerner from Toulouse, the fashionable doctor who understood the weaknesses of his contemporaries even better than their illnesses. There was that whimsical Gascon Montesquieu, fantastic, ardent, high-complexioned, enthusiastic—outwardly phlegmatic, but full of fire—like certain medicines whose sweetness disguises their headiness. When Montesquieu

published *l'Esprit des Lois*, Mme de Tencin generously bought almost the whole edition to distribute among her friends, and Montesquieu said to her, "You are a little Mother to my book."

Finally, there was Duclos, the young Duclos, a Breton of thirty whom the *Academie des Inscriptions* had elected for his reputation as a wit and without asking anything more of him. Duclos was a sort of younger brother of Voltaire, renowned for his dissipation, his cynicism, the roughness of his tongue, and for being always able to find the brief and exact phrase which sums up a situation or turns a man to ridicule.

Add to this brilliant company such guests as Collé, Helvétius, Marmontel, Peron, and in the middle distance a few budding wits, a few women of the world accustomed to talk without thinking, argue without reflecting, and simper without pleasing. For the women of the world of those days were quite unlike those of our own times. . . .

Add above all Mme Geoffrin, assiduous in her attendance on Tuesdays, and already aiming at the inheritance of such precious notoriety, and preparing her own salon for the reception of all these guests on the day of Mme de Tencin's decease. Such were the frequent guests to whom the hostess

alluded ironically as "my menagerie" or even as "my animals".

The salon of Mme de Tencin was a Liberty Hall wherein free discussion was permitted even of the shortcomings of the powers that be. The indifference of Louis XV was openly criticized and the downfall of the monarchy as result of bad government was already foreseen and foretold there.

This salon had become a formidable power: elections were carried in it, and marriages arranged. There a seat in the Academy was disposed of and the union of two illustrious houses negotiated. In a word, Mme de Tencin achieved in her drawing-room what she had always aimed at—she ruled.

Her rule was exercised with smiles: everybody was interested and amused at Mme de Tencin's. Aphorisms were turned off, and some of them have remained famous, such as her protest to Fontenelle: "It isn't a heart that you have in your breast, but a brain, as in your head." But only intelligent people were received: the hostess had no indulgence for simpletons, although she said that the great mistake we make is not to believe mankind so stupid as it is.

From time to time there was a reading, or each person in the company wrote one of those pen

“portraits” so popular in the eighteenth century; or there would be a debate on some such sentimental problem as “whether it would be more tolerable to believe oneself hated by the object of our affections or to mourn his death.” Fontenelle was slow to answer, for he was rather deaf: Montesquieu answered with deliberation, Astruc with vivacity, Duclos with brilliance, Marivaux with fantasy and La Motte majestically. The simplest answers and the truest were those of Mme de Tencin, because they were the fruit of long experience of men and women and of intercourse with them. From time to time the guests made parodies in So-and-So’s manner, parodies that bewildered good old Fontenelle who often believed them to be authentic texts. Then someone laughing would shout that he was a donkey, and with his hands to his ear he made them repeat.

New Year’s Day was the season for the exchange of trifles—little hammers for cracking almonds, parlour games. Mme de Tencin offered each guest two ells of velvet to cut a pair of breeches, and in the summer, when she set out for her country holidays at Passy they, in return, offered a straw hat to their hostess.

And they made much of one another! They

received each other kindly—I have already remarked that Mme de Tencin was an excellent creature. She could refuse nothing, and was so benevolent, so gentle, that you may be sure that if, in the interest of her affairs, she had found herself compelled to poison you, she would have offered the most delicious poison with the most irresistible smile.

To tell the truth, the woman was born in the wrong century. She should have lived at the epoch of the Fronde, an age when her strong, courageous, resolute spirit (a spirit that rose superior to any event, unable to yield to any human accident) would then have been at ease. She should have had a palpitating life, even a violent life, between a cannon with its fuse alight, a charger prancing to the sound of drum and fife and the flapping of waving standards! Ah! the magnificent Frondeuse she would have been, valiant, dominating, unyielding! Had the heat of battle occupied her energy, she would not have dishonoured her youth nor risked her riper years! Her tame and frivolous century is responsible for the degradation to which she sometimes stooped, for it offered to a dowerless, high-spirited woman no other career than that of courtesan and procuress, and no life worthy of her

qualities. In the midst of a frivolous generation Mme de Tencin was a lost amazon. . . .

We have seen Mme de Tencin live, and live not without intensity, and now it is time for us to bury her.

She died at sixty-six, after having spent two years impotent, unable to leave her armchair, immovable but by no means inactive.

When she expired, her brother the Cardinal experienced a happy release. His feelings were those of a schoolboy after the last lesson before the holidays.

But when old Fontenelle, who was ninety-two and like all old people clung to his habits, was told of her death he raised his trembling hands to heaven and exclaimed: "Such a good woman! Ah! what a worry! Where shall I dine on Tuesdays now?" And he concluded moving his old lips as though already he were chewing something. "Well, on Tuesdays now I must dine at Mme Geoffrin's."

Poor Mme de Tencin, here was a funeral oration worthy of her virtues.

PAUL REBOUX.



The Salon of Madame Geoffrin

NOZIÈRE



THE SALON OF MADAME GEOFFRIN

IF you wish to see the place where Mme Geoffrin lived for more than sixty years, make a pilgrimage to the Rue St. Honoré and stop before No. 372. At the time of writing his valuable memoir of Mme Geoffrin, the Marquis de Ségur visited the house and found it already shorn of its old-time splendour. He noticed, not without regret, that a dealer in antiquities, M. Seligmann, occupied the first floor and had cut the large room that was once the illustrious salon in two. That was more than thirty years ago, but the eighteenth century was already in fashion, and no doubt M. Seligmann offered his customers things that Mme Geoffrin might have admired and touched. To-day you would find the house lived in by persons whose professions existed in her time—a doctor, a lawyer, a financier, a seller of fancy goods. There is also a perfumer's, and certainly the ladies and the men of the eighteenth century used scent, and had the greatest need of it, for they had not command of all the resources of hydrotherapy and the condition of the streets was unfortunate.

Madame Geoffrin's education prepared her to preside over a literary, philosophic and artistic salon. She was born in 1699 and her mother died a year later in giving birth to a son, Louis. She lost her father in 1706, when she was only seven. The two children were confided to the care of their maternal grandmother, Mme Chemineau.

The father of the little girl who will one day become Mme Geoffrin was named Pierre Rodet and he had been a valet of the wardrobe at Court. His wife, Mlle Chemineau, was of higher social position for she was the daughter of a small banker. She had a certain talent for painting, and thought seriously about developing the gifts of her daughter when the child was six weeks old. This makes me fear that Mme Pierre Rodet must have been an intellectual bore, but there is good reason to suppose her mother more sensible: she prepared her granddaughter marvellously well for the part she was one day to play, although she cannot have suspected it. Who could foresee that the daughter of a valet would receive in her salon men of letters, philosophers, painters, foreign noblemen, would correspond with the Empress of Russia, would be warmly welcomed by the sovereigns of Austria, and that the King of Poland would call her "Mamma"?



Photo: Bulloz.

MADAME GEOFFRIN

From a Portrait by Jean-Marc Nattier in the Marquis d'Estampes' Collection.



To what qualities did this middle-class woman owe her extraordinary destiny? Probably to the fact that she knew how to receive intellectual men and artists, and it was for this that her grandmother instinctively prepared her when she decided that the little girl should be taught nothing. No, I exaggerate; she taught her to read. As for writing, there were copies and pothooks that she could imitate when she had leisure and the fancy seized her, but Mme Geoffrin always remained ignorant of the mysteries of spelling. Mme Chemineau pinned her faith to natural intelligence and mother-wit.

Ignorance forces a woman who is not stupid to make great use of her brains. She must train herself to talk dexterously about things she does not understand. She must apply herself to guessing what her interlocutor wishes her to say. She must learn to enter into the feelings of men and women. When there is danger that her ignorance will be discovered, she must have wit enough to change the conversation and with a laughing answer escape the risks of a serious response. A blue-stocking is not on her guard in this way: she relies on her knowledge: she may be tempted to discourse on subjects with which she is familiar. She wants to shine, esteeming this the just reward of her studies. But

to direct a literary salon successfully it is necessary that a woman be profoundly ignorant. Thus she does not compete with her guests: she listens to them with unfeigned attention instead of with a politeness that ill conceals her impatience to have her say; she knows that she has everything to learn. She does not raise objections that may be untimely, or make protests: one speaks before her in perfect security, and that is the desire of every man and every woman who aspires to live in the atmosphere of literary and artistic salons. Thus I think that we have proved that the woman who would surround herself with the intellectual *élite* of her times must be ignorant, and we see how much Mme Geoffrin owed to the sagacious and prophetic education of her worthy Grandmother Chemineau.

But Mme Chemineau decided that this education must be religious. She recommended pious reading, and the little girl fulfilled all her religious duties in her parish church, St. Roch. The grandmother was not obliged to insist, for the child was attracted by religion and even had a girlish attack of mysticism. Did she not aspire to leave the Rue St. Honoré and go to live in the desert taking with her her brother Louis, who seems never to have had much will of his own, and who, doubtless, was

subject to his sister's influence? One might have supposed that this enthusiast of thirteen would develop into a saint as fervent as St. Theresa, her patroness; but, as you know, she became the Egeria of the Encyclopædia. Still, the Church had a great influence on the youthful Thérèse, for it was in St. Roch's that she attracted the attention of François Geoffrin. She was fourteen and he was forty-eight. An idyll. Geoffrin had worked all his life in the mirror trade; he was not a workman but a clerk of a company in which he became head cashier, and he retained this post when the company became the Compagnie de Saint-Gobain, which to our own day is the most considerable glass manufactory of France. Everybody esteemed his uprightness and his honesty, but those qualities never yet enriched a man, not even in the seventeenth century; and François Geoffrin, the model clerk, owed his fortune to an old maid whose heart he touched. Let us not accuse him of fortune-hunting: the worthy man had nothing of the adventurer who lays siege to a woman older than himself to win her fortune. And if some day the life of Mme Geoffrin should be "filmed"—one must foresee every misfortune—M. Geoffrin cannot be made to figure on the screen as a cynical, mysterious personage. It was by his

candour, his retiring manner and his piety that he pleased the old woman. In one of Dancourt's comedies *La Femme d'intrigues* a match-making lady proposes a rich widow to a youthful cavalier. After having enumerated her possessions, the match-maker says timidly—"She is perhaps, rather old for you."

"What age?" asks the young man.

"About—sixty."

"Egad," cries the cavalier. "I think her only too young!"

Geoffrin was incapable of such a reflection. He devoted himself to making his wife happy, and she testified to her gratitude by dying before very long, bequeathing to him all her worldly goods, including the house in the Rue St. Honoré. Geoffrin wisely placed the money in the Compagnie de Saint-Gobain of which he thus became a director. No doubt, by marrying a little girl of fourteen after being the husband of an old woman he thought to strike an average. He bore so good a reputation that one cannot suspect him of perversity: Thérèse had won his heart (as he had won his wife's heart) by her piety and her sweetness, and he said to himself that this little girl would be peaccable and docile. Moreover, she brought him 185,000 livres

to add to the 250,000 that he possessed, plus the house. You will protest that with her dowry Thérèse could have found a younger husband. But François Geoffrin was greatly respected in the parish. He would be a father to her and also to her brother Louis. The two children would be very much alone in the world should they lose their grandmother. You must remember, too, that Thérèse was pious: it may be that she followed the advice that Orgon gives his daughter Marianne in *Tartufe*: "Mortify your senses in marriage." I hasten to add that Francis Geoffrin was not in the least like *Tartufe*: his taste in music assimilates him to *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*. Like M. Jourdain, he played the trumpet-marine, which was by no means the noisy instrument its name suggests—one might imagine it a precursor of jazz—far from that, it is a mild stringed instrument, and in his leisure moments Geoffrin handled the bow. The couple lived a quiet life, very simply in the Rue Saint Honoré. In 1715 a daughter, Marie-Thérèse was born (she became in due course Marquise de la Ferté-Imbault.) Two years later a son appeared, but he died when he was ten. The grandmother Chemineau had not lived to see him, and the little Mme Geoffrin—she was eighteen—had to look

after her two children and her brother Louis, a great gawk. The superior of the Seminary advised giving him dancing lessons to make him supple, and teach him how to hold himself. But Louis cared nothing about a graceful carriage, he was a worthy fellow who lived sensibly and kept his accounts. Mme Geoffrin, too, knew the value of money; she cared neither for jewellery nor for dress, and M. Geoffrin must have congratulated himself on having chosen this consort so steady despite her youth. Aye! he had made a wise choice; so young a girl must naturally be under the influence of an experienced husband who moulds her without an effort. Arnolphe was wise in wishing to make Agnès his wife. True, he had no luck, but the method is good and M. Geoffrin is proving it. He possesses a wife who follows the precepts of the admirable Chrysale:

*To guide her children in the path of virtue.
Rule her household, keep an eye on her man.
Spend with a wise economy
Must be her aim and her philosophy.*

At this juncture Mme de Tencin came to live in the Rue Saint Honoré: she was modestly lodged near the Oratory in a house that had serious incon-

veniences, among them that of being below the level of the street so that when the Seine overflowed its banks one had to reach Mme de Tencin by boat. She was still a pleasing woman. In our day she would have been accounted young, for at the death of the Regent in 1723 she was only thirty-eight, and maturity does not seem to have disturbed the proportions of the perfect figure that she displayed so generously to the admiration of that prince. Everyone knew the manner of Mme de Tencin's life, it was she who organized for the Regent and Dubois the notorious fêtes of Saint-Cloud. We dare not describe these orgies. There were the feasts of Adam, and the title indicates what costume was *de rigueur*. There were the Feasts of the Scourgers, and this title shows what was their essential pleasure. Encouraged by Dubois (who found in these festivals a means of retaining his hold on the Regent), Madame de Tencin made Messalina and Cleopatra take part in the nights of Saint-Cloud. With them she associated Ninon de Lenclos who had died some fifteen years earlier, and who would have been amazed to find herself in such company. Mme de Tencin would have done anything to please Dubois. For him, and at his request, she wrote *La Chronique scandaleuse du*

genre Humain, while her brother the Abbé de Tencin pulled innumerable wires for Dubois—in-
deed, it was his cynical activity that persuaded Innocent XIII to make Dubois a Cardinal at the
Conclave of 1721. The Marquise and the Abbé,
with a fraternal, and more than fraternal, solidarity,
served Dubois to safeguard their own interests, and
in due course the Abbé de Tencin became Arch-
bishop of Embrun, Cardinal-Archbishop of Lyons,
Chargé d’Affairs of France, and Minister of State.
We may be sure that he always used his influence in
favour of the sister whom he loved, not wisely but
too well.

One would have supposed that Mme Geoffrin
could never set foot in the house of such a woman
as Mme de Tencin. One would suppose that M.
Geoffrin must have forbidden his discreet and well-
behaved young wife to know such a neighbour, and
we wonder how the acquaintance came about. Did
the blind religiosity of M. Geoffrin believe in the
repentance of Mme de Tencin who seems, in fact,
to have changed her way of life? Did this good
Christian remember all that the Gospel promises to
the repentant sinner, or did the Abbé de Tencin
make an impression on M. Geoffrin, who always
showed a great respect for the clergy? It is evident

that against all that could be anticipated, Mme Geoffrin went to Mme de Tencin's and struck up a friendship with her. You begin to smell a rat and divine some episode of the *Liaisons Dangereuses*. You already smile at the thought that good M. Geoffrin, not satisfied with having married too young a wife, sends her or lets her go to so dangerous a creature. Let us out with it. You expect *gossip* which is the crumbled bread of history. Well, no! M. Geoffrin, more lucky than wise, was never what so many husbands were in those classical days. Neither the slander of tale-bearers nor the indiscretions of history have been able to attribute the smallest adventure to Mme Geoffrin. I rejoice as a moralist but regret it for this lecture which would have been spicier if I could have evoked mysterious rendez-vous, à la Watteau in a park, or little suppers in a golden light borrowed from La Touche. We must resign ourselves to the fact that Madame Geoffrin was an honest woman. True, the men whom she met at Mme de Tencin's were not of those who excite a woman's imagination unduly, and though young Montesquieu had shown an extreme, almost senile, taste for licentiousness in his *Lettres persanes*, the criticism of society had been the base of this fantasy

and the author soon became absorbed in such irreproachable topics as *Considerations on the Causes of the Greatness and Decay of Rome*. With Montesquieu Mme de Tencin received Saurin, author of some philosophic tales of extreme heaviness, and Mme Geoffrin was also privileged to meet La Motte-Houdard and Fontenelle, scholars who likewise contributed a philosophic-scientific decorum to the entertainments of the Duchesse du Maine at Sceaux. They were stricken with *Modernism* as we should say in these days. La Motte-Houdard had re-written the Iliad to improve on Homer. He aspired to abolish the old-world prejudice of poetry and composed odes in prose on subjects of impeccable morality. Here are some of his titles: *On Duty, On the wish to immortalize one's name, On Doing Good, On Emulation*. He is a poet who does not seem to have been dangerous to women. Fontenelle had no less confidence in the cold light of reason. He feared any emotion that might affect his health, and thus lived till his hundredth year; but it has been asserted that a spontaneous man would live in a quarter-of-an-hour more than Fontenelle in a century. Fontenelle took every precaution necessary to secure himself against trouble, and as, by writing

the *History of Oracles* and the *Allegory of Borneo* he might have laid himself open to the suspicion of irreligion, he did not fail to fulfil his Easter duty and lead the life of virtue to which he resigned himself early because vice is prejudicial to the health. It is reported that his mother had told him that notwithstanding all his little moral virtues he would be damned, and no doubt the good lady thought so. As a free thinker, he was destined for Hell; but that was a country he had not discovered while studying the plurality of worlds, and he congratulated himself on prizing the good things of this world and clinging to even the most modest with savage gentleness. One of his best friends liked butter with asparagus and Fontenelle preferred oil. One day at dinner the faithful companion was seized with an alarming illness whereon Fontenelle rushed to the kitchen and shouted "Serve it all with oil!"

Such men as these could not stir the feelings of a young woman. Moreover, Fontenelle was over seventy when Mme Geoffrin made his acquaintance. She was under his influence during the thirty years that he had still to live, or rather the coldness of his logic harmonized with the reasonable mind of the charming and prudent young lady philosopher. When she came to know Fontenelle and the rest

of Madame de Tencin's friends, Mme Geoffrin was about thirty, and we may suppose her to have had the appearance immortalized by Nattier a few years later, in 1738. It is certain that Nattier did not malign his sitters, but adorned them with mythological beauty. However, in the case of Mme Geoffrin the features were really regular and refined and the form of the face was agreeable although very intellectual. The forehead was large and luminous, the eyes shone under their imperious arch, the nose was purely chiselled and the mouth charming. The hands are elegant, and the body is sufficiently unveiled for us to admire the rounded shoulders, a bust such as is no more to be found in these days, and limbs harmoniously robust. Such a woman would scarcely be admired by modern dressmakers, nor by you, ladies; she has not the modern line; but she will please men, even those of our own day, for they do not share your enthusiasm for the scarecrow type and admire female charms in woman. Mme de Tencin's friends must have looked with interest at this young, unblemished, and wealthy visitor. Mme de Tencin was ageing and she was not rich: men of mind were not indifferent to little presents: she could only offer them a length of velvet for their breeches on

New Year's Day, and her table was not sumptuous. Mme Geoffrin offered the possibility of better things and all aspired to be received in her house.

It is at this juncture that the tribulations of the worthy M. Geoffrin begin. Mme Geoffrin's house is his house too. Is his spouse going to fill it with writers, philosophers and scholars so heretical as to smell of burning? The pious M. Geoffrin trembles. No! Perish the thought! His door shall be shut against such miscreants. Now and henceforward, as in the past, he will receive only honest and respectable fellow-parishioners. But Mme Geoffrin, since she has discoursed with Mme de Tencin's friends, can no longer endure the chatter of these worthy folk. Do you need to be told what happened? Need I tell you that M. Geoffrin gave way, for it is always the husband's part to submit? Moreover, in this case, the husband, who is good-natured to the point of weakness, will soon be seventy, and his wife is only just turned thirty. He gave way; but he had not yet foreseen the full extent of his misfortune. His wife was not slow to learn that to attract writers, philosophers and scholars it is well to offer succulent repasts: a personage in Oscar Wilde's *Dorian Gray* says of a lion-huntress whose house is thronged with men of

letters and artists: "She owes her success to her cook. She hasn't a salon but a dining-room." Mme Geoffrin was no fool, and her modesty suggested to her imagination that the bait of a good dinner might be attractive to thinkers and to creators of the beautiful. It is so even in our own times: every woman who prides herself on attracting men of talent takes care to feed them well. 'Tis a method worthy of encouragement, but it has its disadvantages. Seduced by the excellence of the food and wine, certain guests forget to talk and disappoint the hopes of their kind hostess, who, secretly resentful of their silence, thinks of the magnificence of the menu and says to herself that it was so much money wasted.

And so thought M. Geoffrin with indignation. Had not his wife instituted her Wednesday dinners? Alas, every Wednesday at one o'clock the table was laid for a great number of guests. As he watched the procession of wines and dishes, M. Geoffrin longed to cry with Molière's *L'Avare*: "Ah, Traitress, you devour all my goods."

It was necessary to engage more servants, increase the stock of linen, porcelain and silver. Those blessed guests stayed on till evening, for after the repast they were at leisure to converse—indeed, this

was the very object of the institution. Every week M. Geoffrin protested: "Never again! I will never give another ha'penny," and every week Mme Geoffrin heaved despairing sighs and her daughter Marie-Thérèse intervened to calm her. The young girl was about to become the Marquise de la Ferté-Imbault, for she married at eighteen. Meanwhile, she tried to arrange matters between her father and mother without forgetting her uncle Louis, who sided with his brother-in-law against his sister. For Louis, though he loved his sister well and left her all his fortune, always mistrusted expenditure and ostentation. Thus he was the natural ally of M. Geoffrin, and his sister wished him at Jericho! But the power of her energy and the strength of her lungs overcame all opposition, and M. Geoffrin always gave way. That these weekly assemblies angered him it is easy to understand, for they bored him. But he need not have made himself unhappy over their cost, for the family income could easily bear the expense. When he realized that he could not prevent these Wednesday dinners taking place, he decided to organize them so as to avoid waste, and it was he who carved and kept an eye on the service: but to his guests he never said a word. What he heard either wounded his convictions or

would have made him yawn if he had not known the code of good manners. His guests, conscious of the hostility masked by his politeness, have tried to make him seem a fool. But they exaggerated. We cannot believe that he read the same volume of a book several times and said that the author repeated himself a little; nor that he studied a page of Bayle's Dictionary without finding out that it was printed in double columns; nor that he could come home after the play in ignorance of the title of the piece because he had forgotten to look at the play-bill. These are the ill-natured jokes of ill-tempered guests. Like M. Bergeret, M. Geoffrin was silent in order to make his wife's life unbearable. But unlike Mme Bergeret, Mme Geoffrin did not dream of leaving her home, and M. Geoffrin's misfortunes did not prevent him living to the age of eighty-four. He died at the end of 1749, and soon afterwards a guest who had returned from a journey enquired what had become of the old gentleman he had always seen at the table and who never said anything.

"It was my husband," said Mme Geoffrin.
"He is dead."

I have a great weakness for M. Geoffrin. It is difficult to be the husband of a brilliant woman:

he felt this, and after having vainly tried to keep Mme Geoffrin in the shade with him, he resigned himself to obscurity and silence. Perhaps he said to himself that Mme Geoffrin was as ignorant of all the subjects of those long conversations as he was, and yet that did not prevent her from treating them with authority. When he compared the ignorance of his spouse with the admiration she inspired, he may, perchance, have tasted a serenely magnificent enjoyment. It is not easy to be the Queen's husband. M. Geoffrin played the part with gentle resignation. Let us honour his memory!

The real master of the house was Fontenelle. He had become very deaf, an infirmity that may sometimes seem enviable to those who have let themselves be decoyed into certain literary circles. He had the help of his ear-trumpet which he used only when the conversation seemed to him worthy of interest—a thing he divined from the expressions of the faces or the quality of the talkers. His nephew, a regular fool, was admitted to the house, and the terrible uncle by an icy rejoinder let him see that he held his overweening vanity in contempt. Fontenelle did not love his nephew. He loved no one, he passed through life unmoved by any tenderness. All

uncontrollable impulses surprised him: he could not understand that Mme Geoffrin's young daughter should really be obliged to laugh! He had never laughed and never cried. He said that to be happy (that is to say to live long) one needed a good digestion and a bad heart. He would have died leaving old servants destitute had not Mme Geoffrin thought of their necessities. On her advice, he made a will of which she was executrix and thus brought his long life to a decorous end. She was a good deal under the influence of Fontenelle, who was her master in science, and this influence was prolonged after his death in 1757. His friend Mairan remained near Madame Geoffrin, but less selfish than Fontenelle he died younger—at ninety-three—in 1771.

Like her two old friends, Mme Geoffrin lived prudently. She was always very disinterested in money matters, and we like her for having refused the fortune which Mairan bequeathed to her. But then she was very rich: she did not spend her income which the Marquis de Ségur has estimated at 150,000 livres. She was always orderly and energetic. Most of her fortune was invested in the glass manufactory of Saint-Gobain. At one time the business was in a bad way, and Mme Geoffrin, who was a director, pointed out which member of the

staff would have ability to pull the business round. Her surmise was correct: prosperity was restored, and it was Mme Geoffrin who roused the other members of the board and compelled them to reward the man according to his deserts. She had plenty of sense, and understood that there must be no cheese-paring economies on the salaries of those from whom a maximum output is demanded.

She applied the same principle to her dealings with artists whom she attached to her by paying a good price for their pictures, statues, writings. The originality of her salon was that she received painters, sculptors and engravers as well as men of letters, an innovation for which she appears to have awaited the death of M. Geoffrin. By thus enlarging her circle she outran Mme de Tencin, who had set her the example and who, like M. Geoffrin, died in 1749. At this time Mme Geoffrin was fifty. The Wednesday dinners were supplemented by Monday dinners, which she begged M. de Caylus, artist and archæologist to organize for her. The influence of M. de Caylus and of his friends on the fine arts was deplorable, for to it we owe that imitation of antiquity which weighed so heavily on the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century. Their clique was not exclusively responsible

for this infatuation, for the discovery of Herculanum in 1711 had roused an interest that became an infatuation after the excavation of Pompeii in 1755. Vien, who was the master of David, worked for Mme Geoffrin, and so did Boucher, La Tour, Joseph Vernet, Lagrenée, Drouais, Carl Van Loo, Greuze, Oudry, Leprince, Hubert Robert. Not a bad list! Between 1750 and 1770 she had more than sixty pictures painted for her. She took pleasure, too, in collecting knick-knacks and (like all women) in discovering antiques and curiosities, which she bought cheap. This is a quality possessed by every woman of the world worthy of the name! With her caressing hand she knows how to appraise old wood and antique copper. She is not of those who can be taken in, and Mme Geoffrin certainly would not have missed the bargains to be picked up in marine stores and *flea fair* had those treasure-grounds existed in her day; but in addition to antiques she gave employment to contemporary artists, who have the right to live, since some day their works, faded, discoloured, worm-eaten and cracked, will become antiques. After the death of Van Loo, she bought for 4,000 livres two of his pictures, for which a Russian prince soon afterwards offered her 50,000 livres. She accepted, but sent the

difference of price to the widow of the artist, an anecdote proving that she did not try to make money when she bought paintings and resold them. She had them painted for the pleasure of looking at them, and she suggested the subject and the size because she wished to adorn this or that room in her house.

Her authority was sometimes exasperating. Boucher flatly refused to follow her instructions in the matter of a scene from the life of Scipio. Greuze could not bear her reflections, and threatened to paint her as a school mistress, rod in hand, to frighten all children present and to come. She *was* rather a prig—it is the besetting sin of ladies who have a literary salon. In the beginning, they are diffident: little by little they grow bolder, till, encouraged by friendly or interested praise they come, in all good faith, to believe themselves the intellectual equals of the artists and men of letters who surround them. They even suppose themselves the superiors of the creatures who, through politeness, are weak enough to submit their works to them. Thus they become the school-marm, claiming the right to be the teacher who corrects. Sometimes—most comical of all—they consider themselves to be muses.

It must be difficult to resist this intoxication. Just think of this daughter of the Court manservant Rodet. Not only does she receive authors, philosophers, and artists in her house of the Rue Saint Honoré, but every distinguished foreigner wishes to be presented to her and to contemplate in her circle the intellectual lights of France. Ambassadors who represent their country at Paris learn lessons in her drawing-room and gather information that they are glad to pass on to their sovereigns. They present to Mme Geoffrin the best among their compatriots who pass through Paris, and these, in their turn, venture to introduce their family and friends. The fame of Mme Geoffrin soon becomes world-wide. She is obliged to take note of all these foreigners whom she receives and whom she classes according to their country. She must keep some reminder of them lest they should return or should send some introduction. And there is a crowd! Mme Geoffrin must have acquired a royal memory—which is to be able to refer quickly to notes that are carefully indexed. In 1758 Prince Cantémir, the Russian Ambassador to France, presented the Princess of Anhalt-Zerbst, who had just arrived in Paris. Mme Geoffrin delighted the princess, who talked to her new friend about her wonderful daughter, the

grand-duchess, she who was afterwards Catherine the Great. We have often seen Catherine on our stage and on our films of late years; Mr. Bernard Shaw has given us a powerful caricature of her; and M. Marcel Achard, in his adaptation of M. Dupuy-Mazuel—*The Chess Player*—sketches her impressively. She seized the reins of government in conditions that alarmed public opinion. Those who read her correspondence in French with her mother's friend, Mme Geoffrin, will see in the first place that she is not a savage and also that she is mistress of their tongue. They will see, too, that she has not the prejudice of caste, that she is liberal-minded. How can anyone suspect of crimes a woman who knew how to write such pretty letters? How suspect of tyranny one who banishes all ceremonial between herself and Mme Geoffrin? For several years letters were exchanged regularly between Catherine the Great and Mme Geoffrin, and if at times the correspondence languishes, it is because Mme Geoffrin delays her answer.

Mme Geoffrin has no longer the aspect of the mythological divinity portrayed by Boucher. She is a sexagenarian whose portrait Chardin has painted: a woman who does not try to hide her age, who dresses simply in sombre colours, whose

eye keeps an intelligent glance and her mouth a quizzical expression. Look at her well. A woman sure of herself, perfectly conscious of her value, who would with serenity give advice to all young women, even to Catherine the Great. She does not fail to do so, and the sovereign, with extreme nicety lets her feel her mistake.

She had not time to blunder with the King of Sweden, Gustavus III, whose sojourn in Paris was brief, and who kept an agreeable remembrance of the Rue Saint Honoré; but she seems at times to have gone too far, as in the case of Hume, the philosopher, when he was secretary at the British Embassy. Hume, no doubt, would have been wiser had he abstained from flirting with the fair. Still, we feel a certain shock in reading the notes in which Mme Geoffrin addresses him as *dear rascal* or *old scamp*. Hume, on his return to London, presented Franklin to her, but the American did not speak French and made no impression on Mme Geoffrin. Horace Walpole, too, was introduced by Hume, but he soon showed himself hostile to Mme Geoffrin, in whom he had vaguely perceived from the first a spice of absurdity. But she almost lost her head when Stanislas-Augustus Poniatowski became King of Poland, for she had been his guide in

Paris and paid his debts when he was a lad of nineteen, and he called her "Maman". He owed his crown to Catherine, who had treated him with marked attention when he represented his country at Saint Petersburg, and who did not fail to write to Mme Geoffrin to congratulate her on this event with which she expressed herself so surprised. For Catherine wished it to be said at Paris that she had no part in the affair and that the unanimous wish of the Poles had placed Stanislas on the throne. Mme Geoffrin immediately took the field for the recognition by France of the new King. Rather maladroitly, she spoke to Choiseul about it and received a very curt reply. The minister seems to have entrusted her with an ultimatum for Stanislas-Augustus, but finally things settled down and in an affectionate letter the new King wrote that he should be happy to see his *Maman* in his capital. Despite her age, Mme Geoffrin resolved to make the journey: she would be the Sully of this Henry of Navarre, the Queen of Sheba of this Solomon. It seemed a dream! But no: after having carefully prepared her expedition and had her travelling carriage built for her, we find her rolling towards Warsaw at the age of sixty-seven. She did not pass through Berlin as Grimm advised, for she

considered Frederick a poor creature and maintained that in fifty years his existence would be forgotten. Such was the perspicacity of her judgment. She would go through Vienna, and there she was very well received, and presented to the Empress. The grace of the little Archduchess Marie Antoinette impressed her, and she greatly wished that she could see her in France. As we know, this hope was realized; but Mme Geoffrin cannot be felicitated on her foresight.

One day when he was out driving, the Emperor left his carriage to greet his guest: can we wonder that her head was turned? And what cheering when she reached Warsaw and Stanislas-Augustus welcomed her with "Voilà Maman!"

Even if she lost her head, she was saner than her friends at Paris. Marmontel asks her to establish the reign of Peace over the entire globe: Voltaire solicits the intervention of Poland to save the Chevalier de la Barre. She, being on the spot, understood the futility of Stanislas' power. It may be that he was well-intentioned, but what could he do? He was incapable of protecting the poor against injustice and extortion, and he was submissive to the nobles of his country. Stanislas-Augustus was neither Henry IV nor Solomon, and Mme Geoffrin

could be neither Sully nor the Queen of Sheba; but as she had concealed these secret hopes from everyone, as all her letters quivered with enthusiasm, she was able on her return to seem overjoyed at having seen her "child" and at having been fêted by the Court of Vienna. She had given proof of surprising energy and endurance, and she was welcomed back to Paris with admiration. A triumph likely to turn even the steadiest of heads.

Shortly before her visit to Poland, Mme Geoffrin had begun to interest herself in Mlle de Lespinasse. She felt esteem, sympathy and admiration for this woman who possessed such a rare and sensitive intelligence, and she was glad to give this proof of friendship to d'Alembert, who, as we know, was much attached to Mlle de Lespinasse and who had pleaded to Mme Geoffrin in her favour. But, above all, she was delighted to annoy Mme du Deffand, who had always despised her salon. Women who patronize artists and authors are usually separated from one another by hatred and jealousies, and to come to the rescue of the companion whom Mme du Deffand had just turned out of her house, to afford the young lady the means of receiving the friends of the Marquise, was an undreamed of delight to Mme Geoffrin. She gave Mlle de

Lespinasse the wherewithal to furnish prettily the flat she had found in the Rue Saint-Dominique, and before long d'Alembert installed himself in the floor above her. Mlle de Lespinasse received a yearly pension of three thousand livres from Mme Geoffrin, who also pensioned d'Alembert; but no one knew of these liberalities until her papers were examined after her death.

Mlle de Lespinasse's salon has been defined as the laboratory of the Encyclopædia. As she was free to take all her friends to Mme Geoffrin's, it followed that the older woman, too, received the Encyclopædists. She had not waited to know Mlle de Lespinasse before interesting herself in the publication that let loose the ire of the religious party, for it was she who had provided funds the first time that the publication was suspended when d'Alembert retired from it leaving everything to the charge of Diderot. Mme Geoffrin had never admitted Diderot to her salon because of his queer manners: his habit of button-holing his interlocutor and his wild gestures. It was said that Catherine the Great was covered with bruises at the close of the conversation she had granted him, and he would have been a formidable guest at the Wednesday dinners. However, Mme Geoffrin gave

him a charming surprise : having ventured into the dwelling of the great man and found it miserably poor she had it transformed, furnished and hung with pictures in his absence. We cannot too highly recommend Mme Geoffrin's methods to ladies who admire philosophy and letters.

After the journey to Poland, Mlle de Lespinasse filled a great place in the house. She was admitted to both the Monday and the Wednesday dinners. This was a complete revolution, for never before had a woman guest partaken of those dinners, and never after was any other woman invited. It is a fashion that the hostesses of literary, artistic, philosophic and financial Salons have a tendency to preserve. They assemble men only round their table, each hostess believing, doubtless, that she alone among women can appreciate brilliant and profound intelligence and that, by inviting other women she would lower the level of the conversation. I do not approve the reasoning : only women can show such a contempt for women.

The impiety of the Encyclopædists soon brought trouble on Mme Geoffrin. She lodged Marmontel in her house and his novel *Belisaire* was condemned. The decree of the Censor and the charge of the Archbishop of Paris were read in all the churches

and posted on the author's door—that is to say on Mme Geoffrin's door. She did not like misfortune or defeat. She had not been shocked by Marmontel's boldness: she would have acclaimed his victory; but she was vexed that he should have offended public opinion, and though she continued to accord him her friendship, she requested him to lodge elsewhere.

In this same year of 1767, a few months after her return from Warsaw, the Abbé de Guasco, against whom she had been obliged to close her door, produced some posthumous letters of Montesquieu, *Les Lettres Familières*. The publication was Guasco's vengeance on Mme Geoffrin for she had been ridiculed in three of these letters. Worse still, in an article on the letters published by the Abbé Guasco in the *Gazette de Hollande*, he alluded to Mme Geoffrin as "The fishwife of fashionable society, the Lady Bountiful of literature." Mme Geoffrin ought to have been delighted, for the fame or notoriety of a person so attacked is indisputable; but she did not make this reflection and gave herself a great deal of trouble to stop the publication of the letters and make the *Gazette* apologize. She was pitiless towards those who fell foul of her in their writings. Palissol had chaffed her in his comedy

Les Philosophes, and she applied herself to getting his other pieces prohibited.

A more serious worry, indeed a cruel blow, fell upon her at the beginning of 1768, when her correspondence with Catherine the Great came to an end. Perhaps the Empress had been wounded not to receive a visit from her when she had got so far as Poland. M. Rulhière, who had been secretary to the Minister of France when Catherine took the crown, was about to publish an account of that event very deprecatory to the Empress. And negotiations were opened to obtain Rulhière's silence. With enthusiasm Mme Geoffrin accepted the honour of intervening with him, for she flattered herself that she could easily obtain what the Empress wished and would thus recover the confident friendship of the Sovereign. Too sure of herself, and confusing cynicism with authority, she put to Rulhière the question: "How much?"

As he besought her not to continue, she asked: "You want more?" It was a terrible reverse.

But Mme Geoffrin was elastic: she rebounded, and far from tiring of her social activities, she added to the dinners of Monday and Wednesday little suppers to which she invited women: that charming Mme Necker, and especially her beloved

Countess Egmont, who was as fascinating as her father, the Marshal Richelieu. Mme Geoffrin had never admitted the father to her intimacy, but she welcomed the daughter to these agapæ. The repast was light: a chicken, spinach, eggs. But the talk was light, too, far lighter than at the Monday and Wednesday dinners. It must not be supposed, however, that lightness implies indecency. Mme Geoffrin always imposed on her guests the tone of the best society. She knew how to stop conversations that wandered on dangerous ground.

She distrusted politics too: or, rather, she had a horror of them. Energetically did she resist that folly of the age. She would not allow political discussion in her house, and Raynal, Turgot, Marmontel and Morellet had to postpone their debate to the hour when they left her and could chatter freely in the Tuileries. In January, 1770, Grimm protests gaily that Mme Geoffrin forbids all her devotees every subject of conversation. His comical enumeration seems to foretell the monologue of Figaro.

In 1772, the last volume of the *Encyclopædia* was published, and there must have been great rejoicing in the house of the Rue Saint Honoré, where d'Alembert and Mlle de Lespinasse reigned. But

part of the house was occupied by Mme Geoffrin's daughter, the Marquise de la Ferté-Imbault, and she was an adversary of the Encyclopædists and gathered their sworn enemies about her. There was never any open quarrel but a long hostility between the mother and daughter. Mme Geoffrin was only sixteen years the elder, and for a long time she looked younger than her daughter, who became deaf early in life and who, after losing her husband and then her only child, led a blameless but fantastic existence. To protest against the Encyclopædists she accomplished the monumental task of opposing the thoughts and developments of the philosophers of every age and country. These *extracts* filled several volumes. And then, suddenly, she created the order of *Lanturelu*. Thus song was installed in Mme Geoffrin's house and did not spare her guests. This sparring was not very serious, and Mme de la Ferté-Imbault showed no real uneasiness until she noted the great influence that Mlle de Lespinasse had come to exercise over her mother. She had a natural dislike of that ardent spirit and tumultuous heart, for Mlle de Lespinasse's nature was the exact opposite to that of Mme de la Ferté-Imbault, who was jealous at seeing her *contraire* exercise such sway over her mother. She

had known d'Alembert for a very long time: he had always come to the house and amused everyone with his talent for taking people off. The learned little man, in spite of all his distresses, was a most lively companion and excellent fellow. But he obeyed Mlle de Lespinasse blindly. He adored her and was, perhaps, only her worshipper though he lived in her house and was present at her bath. He would run to the post to speed the delivery of letters written to her from Spain by M. de Mora, who was dying of phthisis and was destined to expire at Bordeaux while on his way to see her once more. And perhaps M. de Mora also had obtained no special favours from Mlle de Lespinasse! But certainly in the very anguish of her pangs for the sufferings of M. de Mora she had been more indiscreet with M. de Guilbert. She had yielded to him in her box at the Opera. For she adored music, and it was through her, no doubt, that little Mozart was heard at Mme de Geoffrin's, and that Rameau could be seen there at the harpsichord. Mme de la Ferté-Imbault asked herself where Mlle de Lespinasse would decoy her mother. Would she not induce her to scatter money among all the enemies of the faith? Mme Geoffrin was only too inclined for such liberalities: had she not invested more

than a hundred thousand crowns to save the Encyclopædia? Everything was to be feared! A tale-bearing footman informed Mme de la Ferté-Imbault of mysterious confabulations between Mme Geoffrin, Mlle de Lespinasse and d'Alembert. It was at this juncture that Mme de la Ferté-Imbault seized the opportunity of her sixtieth birthday to write a touching letter to her mother in which she expressed regret for having been so often at variance with her; but there was nothing solemn in this wish for reconciliation. In the olden days Mme Geoffrin had thought her daughter like a cat and nick-named her "handsome Tom," and now, as a return match, the daughter addresses her mother as "my lovely Pussy". And to celebrate the good understanding, Mme de la Ferté-Imbault's friends, the *Lanturelu*, are going to perform a burlesque marriage ceremony between handsome Tom and lovely Pussy.

A few months later, on May 21st, 1776, Mlle de Lespinasse died. She had been very ill since the month of November. We may be sure that Mme Geoffrin visited Mlle de Lespinasse until her death and gave her most touching proofs of her affection. During this time had Mme de la Ferté-Imbault opportunities of leading her mother back to her religious duties? That was unnecessary, for Mme

Geoffrin from time to time went into retreat in the Convent of the Abbey of Saint Antoine, where the painter Hubert Robert has immortalized her seated among the nuns. This does not imply that she had become devout: but it is worth mentioning. She had always believed in the seemliness of dying in the Christian manner, and she was possessed of a Capuchin Friar who had a great gift for leading the emancipated back into the narrow way at the eleventh hour. Therefore there is nothing surprising in the fact that she followed the religious exercises of the jubilee of 1776. She took a chill in the cold church of Notre Dame and was impotent thenceforth. It was natural that her daughter should watch by her bedside and natural, too, that she should try to keep d'Alembert and his free-thinking friends out of the sick-room. On the day that the sacraments were administered she closed the house door against them all, and when d'Alembert said that he would never desert Mme Geoffrin she did not allow him to cross the threshold. That was a scandal, and of course the Encyclopædia supported d'Alembert and denounced Mme de la Ferté-Imbault. After a time, Mme Geoffrin recovered her lucidity. Did she ask to see her friends the philosophers? Mme de Ferté-Imbault



Photo: Bulloz.

MADAME GEOFFRIN AT BREAKFAST.

From a Painting by Hubert Robert in M. Arthur Veil-Picard's Collection.



asserts that her mother approved all the measures she had taken. We are willing to believe her, still we know on her own evidence that the invalid wished to see a brilliant society in her room and that, as her sight had failed, her daughter contrived to make the footmen and maid-servants move about the room so as to give the effect of a social gathering. We cannot help thinking that Mme Geoffrin would have liked to see and hear her friends, but at all events she had the consolation of receiving the visit of the Emperor of Austria who was staying in Paris and spent two hours with her.

We should not dream of contradicting Mme de la Ferté-Imbault. Still, Mme Geoffrin sent two thousand crowns to her friend the poet Thomas, and a sum of money to d'Alembert. And she sent silver plate to her *protégé* Suard, who had married Mlle Panckouke. She had disapproved Suard's marriage with a penniless girl and refused to know her, but Mme Necker invited her to dine with the bride without saying who she was and Mme Geoffrin had loved her at once. She helped the young couple and no one wept her more sincerely than Mme Suard. Mme Geoffrin died on October 6th, 1777. The Sovereigns with whom she had been in correspondence expressed their sympathy and the

Philosophers wrote her praise. But she was soon forgotten; and, doubtless, she left the most cherished remembrance with the Abbé Galiani who so loved her salon that he said that he merely existed since he had been obliged to return to Naples. He it was who had written to her: "I have lost Paris and all my teeth. For that matter, I no longer need to talk: here no one understands me and no one is inclined to listen to me."

Certainly she possessed the art of making her guests shine. The Abbé de Saint Pierre, surprised at his success in her salon, said that he was merely an instrument that she could play. What a resource for a talker to be animated by such a woman!

I have tried to make her a little known to you. Thanks to Hubert Robert, we have surprised her at her hearth: at chocolate-time, and at the moment when the artist, all-a-tremble, submits one of his paintings to her. You can look at the perfume burner executed for her by Gouthière and called by her "a little monument of antique ivory, marble and ormolu." You know the dinner-service offered by the Empress Marie Thérèse. We can conjure up the table laid with Mlle de Lespinasse, d'Alembert, the Encyclopædists and the painters gathered round it, for we are miraculously transported into the

house in the Rue Saint Honoré. You have seen, too, the account-books in which she set down her expenses, the addresses of good trades people and the visits she ought to make. Her life was very full. She had to keep up a huge correspondence and to organize two large dinner parties every week, so she rose at five, and no chambermaid entered her room before she was washed and dressed. You say to yourselves that she must have consecrated long hours to reading. Let me undeceive you: she read very little. She was not fond of books! She seems to have had only a very few in her house—and those were mediocre! This last trait completes the portrait of Mme Geoffrin who loved authors so efficiently and so well.

NOZIÈRE.



The Salon of Madame du Deffand

ANDRÉ BELLESSORT



THE SALON OF MADAME DU DEFFAND

MADAME DU DEFFAND'S story is very brilliant and very sad. On its bright side it reflects the most refined and witty society of the France of the *ancien régime*; and on its sad side one of the most devastated aspects of the human soul. For we have seldom seen—we have perhaps never seen—in such a charming creature so much love of society allied to so much despair. Nor is this the only distinction of Mme du Deffand, for though she was truly of her age—indeed, no one could seem more entirely of it—yet the most sterling qualities of her mind sprang from the preceding century, and she bore within her the dark and bitter melancholy of the century that was to follow.

In an age of pleasure, of happy sensibility, of optimism, an age whose modes and appearance of careless frivolity she adopts, she seems to be at one and the same time a contemporary of Mesdames de Maintenon and de Sévigné without their religious conviction, and of Chateaubriand and George Sand without their romantic imagination. And then, the

great adventure of her life, I had almost said her only adventure, is the most extraordinary that it is possible to conceive.

Marie de Vichy-Champrond was born in 1697 perhaps at Auxerre, perhaps at the Château de Champrond in Saone-et-Loire. Her father belonged to a good Burgundian family wherein wits were keen and feelings warm. Her mother, Anne Brulard, was the daughter of a First President of Burgundy; and her maternal grandmother had made a second marriage with the father of the Duc de Choiseul, who, having had enough of poverty, thought it a good thing to re-gild his coat-of-arms with the Brulards' gold. This is the explanation of the nickname "Grandmama" given by Mme du Deffand to the young Duchesse de Choiseul who might have been her grand-daughter. In the course of the long correspondence between these two women, both so remarkable and so fundamentally serious, these continual appellations of "Grandmama" and "Grand-daughter" became exasperating, and we are surprised that during so many years they never tired of such childishness. One of her mother's sisters, widow of the Marquis of Charost, became by her second marriage Duchesse de Luynes, a lady-in-waiting and friend of the Queen.

Of her two brothers, the elder, the Comte de Vichy-Champrond, was Marshal of the King's camps and armies, and the other, who had taken Orders, was Treasurer of the Sainte-Chapelle.

Left an orphan in childhood, Marie was brought up in the Convent of the Madeleine de Traisnel in the Rue de Charonne. It was one of the leading educational establishments and received the daughters of the nobility and great financiers. She did not retain a grateful recollection of it, for we are all of us inclined to let the responsibility of our mistakes fall upon the masters who did not know how to prevent us from making them. For that matter, there is a good deal to be said about the convents of the eighteenth century, I mean the "best" ones: the studies were unattractive and the training insufficiently religious and a great deal too worldly. The Abbess of the Convent de la Madeleine de Traisnel, Mme de Villemont, friend of the Duchesse d'Orleans and of the Marquis d'Argenson (who for a time lodged in the Convent), was a great deal more perturbed about the smaller intrigues of the Court than about the salvation of her pupils' souls. Nevertheless, Marie, who had won her affection by her precocious intelligence and lively repartees, did make her very uneasy, for the child made a parade

of an unbelief that set a most dangerous example to her companions. Mme de Luynes when she heard of it persuaded Massillon to go himself to sermonize her niece, and the great orator took the trouble to go to see the little girl. He questioned her and she replied with self-confidence. "She is charming," he said to the Abbess. "But," said the Abbess, "what book ought I to give her to read?" Massillon replied with a smile, "Give her a twopenny catechism," and the Abbess could not drag any other answer out of him. How wise he was! By what means can a naturally sceptic spirit be brought to believe? Give it a catechism and put your trust in the grace of God. In a letter to Voltaire, Mme du Deffand, recalling this interview and remembering a line of *Britannicus*, writes 'My spirit trembled before his: it was not to the strength of the arguments but to the importance of the arguer that I yielded.' She always retained her respect for belief and her regret that she did not believe, and if she did not know of Rivarolo's saying that impiety is an indiscretion, she thought it and would even have added that it is ill-bred.

It is said that in her most frivolous days she kept to certain religious observances as if to invite Faith to enter if by chance he should pass that way.

At the age of twenty-two, in 1718, she was married to the Marquis du Deffand de la Lande. He was thirty and had just been appointed Lieutenant-General of the Orléanais. The pair seemed well matched, but unfortunately the Marquis was a fool, a man of whom his brilliant wife said that he "took endless pains to displease." He exasperated her to such a degree that she could not put up with him, and there was an amicable separation. That was in the days of the Regency. Her charm and beauty made a sensation at the Opera-ball where, perhaps, she ought not to have been seen, but she was intimate with Mme Parabère, the titular mistress of the Regent, and with Mme de Prie, the mistress of the Duc de Bourbon, and was invited to the suppers at the Palais-Royal. Her beauty, and even more than her beauty, her grace, her wit, her brilliant sallies, her boldness, her independence, the imperious curiosity that she brought to her pleasures, caught the attention of the Regent, and he had only to ask to have. Their acquaintance lasted a fortnight, if Horace Walpole is to be believed, and it was she who told him. But they were too much alike. Each asked of the other what neither could give—a distraction from the tedium that remorselessly pursued them. Both were admirably gifted,

curious about everything, but with a curiosity that exhausted things without extracting from them the smallest particle of lasting pleasure. They needed to forget themselves, but could do so only in the company of persons whose character was quite unlike their own. The gay mask that each wore in society fell off in the intimacy of love, and each read on the face of the other the signs of the disenchantment they were trying to escape. This young woman who possessed birth, beauty and intelligence was born with the conviction that life is an evil, and there is not a moment of her existence in which we do not feel her fear of being overwhelmed by this reflection which mingles dust and ashes with her wildest and most frivolous delights.

After the Regent she took other lovers. The circle she lived in encouraged this sort of experience. One day Mme de Prie complained about M. d'Alincourt. "I advise you," said Mme du Deffand, "not to air your grievances too much." "Why not?" "Because the public puts a bad interpretation on the complaints of people who have been lovers." "What! you too! Do you too believe that I have been too kind to M. d'Alincourt?" "I have no doubt of it!" And then when Mme de Prie protests indignantly against this calumny, Mme

du Deffand listens coldly. "You are not convinced?" "No." "But what ground have you for thinking that M. d'Alincourt has been my lover?" "You told me so yourself." "Really? Did I? I'd quite forgotten," said Mme de Prie calmly. But Mme du Deffand forgot nothing, and I doubt if she was in the habit of receiving confidences of this nature. But she liked to know everything. A former footman of Voltaire's friend, Mme du Châtelet, who has written down some of his recollections, tells of an orgy made by his mistress and five other ladies of whom were Mme du Deffand and Mme de Boufflers. The scene was in a Cabaret at Chaillot. The supper began late and the ladies did not leave till five in the morning. On the 30th of July, 1721, the Regent gave a splendid fête in honour of the too famous Maréchal d'Estrées at a house in Saint-Cloud that had belonged to the Elector of Bavaria. Mme d'Averne proclaimed her victory over Mme de Parabère whom she had supplanted. "The fête," says Marais, "lasted half through the night, the gardens of Saint-Cloud were lit up with more than twenty thousand candles which, with the cascades and fountains, made a marvellous effect." A great many women had refused to appear at the fête, but

Mme du Deffand was not among them, and her presence was much talked about. She was sailing very near the wind, for it must not be imagined that the licentiousness of the Regency extended throughout Society and had stifled all moral sense in the upper classes. The barefaced corruption of morals was more closely confined to the Regent's Court than is generally believed.

The adventures of the Marquise had not yet been the subject of a scandal: she stopped in time. This was not very difficult to her, for nothing of her heart had gone astray in her errors. She had not yielded to a passionate nature nor to the illusions of fancy. Her mind alone was interested and, in a society wherein what was called Love filled so large a place the verdict she passed upon herself enlightens us as to her disappointment: "Neither temperament nor romance." And yet she was passionate. She had a dry sort of passionateness—a force which did not know on what to feed. She poured it into her conversations, her fancies, into all her efforts to escape from herself so as not to remain *tête-à-tête* with her mortal enemy, tedium.

Wearied, disgusted, obliged to count with a public opinion which, for all its indulgence, would not have tolerated a prolonged scandal, she began

to think seriously of patching up a peace with her husband. The affair is narrated for us by Mlle Aïssé, a young Circassian, bought in Constantinople at the age of five and brought to France by M. de Feréol, the French Ambassador. She was educated in France, and her romantic origin, her love-story with Chevalier d'Aydie, and her letters have made her famous. Everybody is agreed that Mlle Aïssé was an exquisite being, but her letter about the reconciliation of Mme du Deffand and her husband proves that this exquisite being had a beak and claws! "Would that she had not been in such a hurry!" she writes. "But as the good lady must be witty or rather imaginative in season and out of season instead of being reasonable and steadfast, she ran at things full tilt in such a way that the enamoured husband came and settled down at her house, that is to say he dined and supped there, for in the matter of living together she wouldn't hear speak of it for three months to avoid all unjust suspicion. And for six weeks it was the sweetest friendship in the world. At the end of that time she was tired of this way of life and had again been taken with an extreme aversion for her husband. Without showing him any ill humour, she took on an air so despairing and so sad that he

made up his mind to go back to his father, and she takes every possible step to prevent his return. I told her plainly that her conduct was infamous, and though she tried to move me and to make me yield to her reasons, I held out; and for three weeks I did not see her. She came and sought me out, and there was no depth that she didn't sink to to persuade me not to abandon her. I told her that the public was estranged from her just as I was. The upshot of this miserable behaviour is that she can live with no one. A lover whom she had had before she made it up with her husband, had got tired of her and left her, and when he heard that she was on good terms with M. du Deffand he wrote her letters full of reproaches. And he went back to her, wounded vanity having rekindled the smouldering fire! The good lady followed her inclination and without due reflection she preferred a lover to a husband and obliged the latter to surrender the place, but no sooner had he gone than her lover left her again, so that she is the laughing stock of the public, blamed by everyone, despised by her lover, neglected by her friends. She no longer knows what to make of it all."

That is what we may describe as the language of a candid friend who, moreover, expresses herself

very clumsily. Mlle Aïssé has the less justification in taking this tone when we remember how short a time before she had written: "I have succeeded in making Bertin acquainted with Madame du Deffand. She is a beauty and has a great deal of grace: he thinks her most lovable, and I hope that he will begin with her a romance that will last all their life." The lady who busies herself in procuring lovers for friends is badly placed for reproaching them because they cannot agree with their husbands.

The husband being decidedly unbearable, a judicial separation was brought about which placed Mme du Deffand in a rather delicate position. She began by going to live with her brother, the Treasurer of the Sainte Chapelle, and then she took a very modest dwelling in the Rue de Beaune. She had broken with the Regent's circle, and in a short time she succeeded in gathering about her a group of friends that became more and more numerous.

How ought we to picture her? She was small, with a head rather large in proportion to her tiny figure. Her complexion was lovely, her expression most animated and Mlle de Lespinasse will write later that she had "the eyes of an eagle, keen,

piercing and perfectly beautiful." Add to that a great air of nobility. Mlle de Lespinasse will further tell us that "the beauty of her face was not spoiled by the thinness of her breast and of her hands,"—for that matter, we ask ourselves how the breast and the hands could disfigure a face—and that "the charm of her mind almost prevented one from noticing the defect she had of speaking through her nose," and Mlle de Launay will exclaim, "No one has more wit nor more naturalness. The sparkling fire that animates her penetrates to the depth of each object, makes it stand out clearly and gives relief to the simplest sketch." Her wit, we know from everyone who came in contact with her, had nothing pompous, nothing stiff, and nothing prepared—it gushed forth. She herself did not seem to know how brilliant she was, and was surprised by the effect she produced. She would pause, and after a moment's reflection laugh when she saw others laughing at the word that had escaped her.

One day, when the Cardinal de Polignac was speaking to the Duchesse du Maine of the martyrdom of St. Denis, he said, "can you conceive, Madam, that the Saint carried his head in his hands for two leagues two leagues!" "Oh, Mon-

seigneur," cried Mme du Deffand, "*ce n'est que le premier pas qui coûte.*" A hundred repartees of the same quality were attributed to her.

It was about 1730 that she came to know the President Hénault and began a connection with him which in the eyes of the world made an honourable ending to the excitements of her amorous existence. A marriage *in partibus*. Reason had more to do with it than love, at least on her side. President Hénault, born in 1685, after having listened to the eloquence of the preacher Massillon, had believed that he had a religious vocation. He had entered the Oratorians, but two years later God had revealed to him that he was born for the world. His superiors regretted it, and one of them went so far as to shed tears, when Massillon said, laughing: "My Father, did you ever think that he would stay with us?" He became a magistrate, and in 1710 was received into the office of the President of the first Court of Enquiry. He had a keen appreciation of literature, and one day, when Voltaire threw the manuscript of his *Henriade* into the fire after it had been criticized by a circle of friends, Hénault darted forward and snatched it from the flames. He himself could turn off a pretty rhyme, but was less at

his ease in tragedy, and his *Cornélie Vestale*, played at the Comédie-Française, was given only five times. He had read the plays of Shakespeare, which were in the course of translation, and was inspired by them with the ambition of recasting the principal events of French history for the stage. But his play *François II* proves that the best intentions do not suffice in literature. However, he had published a *Nouvel Abrégé chronologique de l'Histoire de France* which is far superior to his tragedies and Shakespearean dramas.

The President was a pleasant, obliging man, a very good talker and excellent companion, and Mme du Deffand wrote of him: "All the good qualities of M. Hénault and even all his defects are to the advantage of society. His vanity gives him an extreme desire to please, his easy temper reconciles to him men of every disposition. . . . In all his actions he is impetuous, in his disputes, in his approbation. He seems keenly affected by the things that he sees and the subjects he treats, but he passes so quickly from the greatest vehemence to the greatest indifference that it is easy to infer that if his soul be quickly moved it is but rarely affected. . . . He is exempt from the passions that most distress our peace of mind. . . . He unites to a great

deal of wit every imaginable grace and refinement: his jesting is lively and gentle, and his conversation filled with ingenious and agreeable remarks." Such was Hénault in 1730.

He was then forty-five years old and Mme du Deffand thirty-three. He had just lost the wife that he had loved intensely: "a woman," so he tells us, "who was gentle, simple, credulous about my conduct, which was rather irregular, but whose credulity was helped by the extreme care that I took to foster it, and by the true and tender affection I had for her." Women had not been unkind to him, but when he became intimate with Mme du Deffand he was calming down and, as he admits, was beginning to be glad if by chance he mistook the hour of a rendez-vous and arrived too late. We have the letters that they exchanged when she was drinking the waters at Forges, but they were written in 1742 and we must not forget that by that time their connection had lasted eleven years. A curious thing is that there is a tenderer tone in those of Mme du Deffand than in the President's. "When I note in you a grain of real feeling," she tells him, "it works in me the miracle of the mustard seed of the Gospel: but it is seldom that you let me enjoy this illusion. . . . I am vexed not to see you, but

I bear this misfortune with a sort of courage because I believe that you don't share it very much and that everything is the same to you." He answers her: "To tell the truth I begin to feel very lonely: you are for me a necessary evil." It is true that in another letter she had said to him, "All your feelings for me are the finer in that there is not one that is natural," and again, "You know how to be absent deliciously."

It was he who introduced her to the Duchesse du Maine, at the Court of Sceaux where he was intimate, and among the women who were received and desired during its last days none was more spoiled and petted than Madame du Deffand.

The Court of Sceaux was the Court of frivolity, of light verses, of songs, of amateur theatricals, of water-picnics and supper parties. Voltaire composed his earliest tales and his immortal *Zadig* there, and Mme du Châtelet won applause by acting in her lover's comedies. The Marquis of Saint-Aulaire was one of the most frequent guests, and a madrigal of four lines had sufficed to open the doors of the French Academy to the noble poet who had not been aware of his gift till he was sixty: however, he lived to enjoy it for another forty years.

One day when the Duchess urged him to tell her his secret, he answered :

*La divinité qui s'amuse
A me demander mon secret,
Si j'étais Apollon ne serait pas ma Muse :
Elle serait Thétis et le jour finirait.*

No madrigal in the language is bolder nor more delicately turned, and it is the only masterpiece of versification produced at the Court of Sceaux.

The Duchesse, no bigger than a doll, who spent three hours a day at her toilet, had all her wits about her and was stuffed full of eloquence, vanity and quaint fancies—a Queen Mab of the drawing-room—but with a strong voice that sounded discordant issuing from that tiny body. She knew everything, in the way that a princess can know everything, and could talk mathematics, geometry, philosophy, natural science, the fine arts, and discuss astronomy as one newly fallen from a star. She was capricious and tyrannical, and her husband and her friends had always treated her as a spoiled child. President Hénault tells us that one evening when she expected Mme d'Estaing she was in tears, beside herself, despairing of her friend's coming, and a lady present could not refrain from saying to her: "Lud! I never

thought that your Highness cared so much for Mme d'Estaing!"—"I care for her!" retorted the Princess, petulantly. "Not a jot! But I should be very happy if I could do without the things I don't care for!" But at other times, when she liked, this little slip of a woman, lively, sparkling, whimsical, flighty, became quite the great lady, quite the Princess of the blood, with a politeness that she had learned of Louis XIV.

The success of Mme du Deffand at the Court of Sceaux, the almost jealous friendship with which she inspired the Duchesse wiped out the last stain left by her years of imprudence and dissipation and assured her a place in Society worthy of her position and her gifts. At Sceaux, where she spent several months every summer, she met philosophers, men of letters, scholars, men and women of the world among whom she could make her choice for the composition of her salon. And soon her house in the Rue de Beaune became too small for her.

In 1747, when she was nearing the age of fifty, she left it and settled herself in the Convent of St. Joseph. At that time most of the religious houses let suites of rooms to widows, to women separated from their husbands, and to maiden ladies. Most of these apartments were in buildings that the nuns

had constructed outside their enclosure, but sometimes—and this was so at St. Joseph's—the apartments were within the walls. These paying guests enjoyed the same freedom as they would have done had they lived in town, and no one found fault with the arrangement, although this exhibition of a very unholy (indeed sometimes a “fast”) way of living was not an example likely to foster a taste for devotion in the pupils of the Convent schools. St. Joseph's stood on the site now occupied by the War Office, and Mme du Deffand lodged in the very apartment that Mme de Montespan, who had founded the house, used to occupy when she came into retreat to ask God to forgive her her sins and to preserve their source—I mean the heart of the King. The fire-back of the grate still bore the coat of arms of the most ambitious of women. We are told that the salon was hung with buttercup yellow moiré with curtains of the same shade relieved with knots of flame colour. When Mme du Deffand received only intimate friends she gathered them into an adjoining room, her bed-chamber. Her large arm-chair with its back shaped like a pent house was nick-named “the marchioness' cask”.

Her entrance into St. Joseph's coincided almost exactly with the dreadful misfortune which was

about to overtake her: her sight failed, and the doctors were powerless to arrest the disease. Mme de Genlis, who lived in the same convent, tells us that she consulted every quack and every impostor and that they were as powerless as the Faculty. Little by little her hope died out, like the light of her lovely eyes, and she remained ever after plunged in darkness. "When she had vainly tried every remedy," says Mme de Genlis, "she easily made up her mind to accept her state and grew completely used to it." It is easy for Mme de Genlis to talk! I myself agree with Augustin Thierry that "an alliance with the shades of night is not easy to contract", and am more inclined to think that Mme du Deffand gave an admirable example of stoicism. She passed through all that period of tribulation when, day by day the mists thickened between her and the outside world without one word of complaint passing her lips, without letting a hint of the terror that possessed her soul appear in any of her letters. She suited her conduct to her sombre conception of life. Can you name many philosophers who have done so? Long ago she had decided that life is evil and that the greatest misfortune is to have been born. What she calls her *ennui* is in truth only a deep-rooted pessimism. Her blindness

does but confirm her despair. Moreover, she understands human nature: she has no illusions about it. "I am like the late Regent," she will write later to Horace Walpole, "I can see nothing but fools and knaves. . . . All the same, I have nothing better to do than to live among them." Above all, she knows how futile and short-lived is compassion, and that people hate to be saddened by the grief of others and avoid those who talk about their sorrows. Politeness and wisdom decree that we keep our troubles to ourselves. She would certainly have approved the lines of de Vigny had they been written soon enough for her to know them:

*To weep, to pray, to groan is cowardly. . . .
Silence alone is great, the rest is weakness.*

When she had lost all hope, when she knew that she was definitely cut off from the world of sight, she only informed her friends and the constant visitors to her salon. Do you know Montesquieu's answer? "You say that you are blind. Do you not see that in other days you and I were little rebellious spirits condemned to darkness? You must be consoled by the reflection that those who see plainly are no more luminous." Thus did the author of the *Lettres persanes* receive the news that

one of the greatest afflictions a human being can endure had befallen a friend! 'Tis all very well to be witty about laws, but about blindness! Voltaire, who had more heart, or at all events was more impressionable, was more decent. "I thought," he writes, "from the letter of M. de Froment that you were in the dusk, and not in the dark; but if you have lost your sight I pity you infinitely." His wit exercised itself when he wrote on this subject to friends. "Why must we be punished through the source of our sins, and why is nature so furiously resolved to destroy her best works? At least Mme du Deffand preserves her wit, which is even finer than her eyes." And all at once this woman who had said nothing of her anguish finds herself thrown back upon herself and fearfully alone. "You seem to me sorrowful even unto death," d'Alembert wrote to her, "but why? Why do you fear to find yourself at home again? With your wit and your income, can you lack acquaintances? I don't speak of friends, for I know that that commodity is rare; but those who can offer a good repast can receive whom they will, and if they think it to the point they can make fun of their guests afterwards."

The Marquis de Ségur in his book on Julie de



Photo : Bulloz.

VOLTAIRE AT "LES DÉLICES."

From a Painting attributed to Jeaurat in M. Xavier Schelcher's Collection.

Lespinasse mentions these refined and penetrating consolations with more indulgence than they deserve. But the truth is that the abuse of wit withers the heart, and few societies show more instances of heartlessness than that of the 18th century in spite of its cult of sensibility and its infatuation for humanitarian theories. As for d'Alembert, his intimate correspondence betrays a fundamental coarseness that we may explain or excuse by the misfortune of his birth and early years, but we could have hoped that his intelligence, his learning, and his habitual company would have hidden it more effectually.

Mme du Deffand, wounded and afflicted, craved for a change of surroundings: she dreamed of living far from all that she had thought indispensable to her existence, and she went to Champrond where her elder brother who had retired from the army, lived the life of a country squire surrounded by his wife and children. She stayed there a year and when she returned to Paris she was accompanied by the famous Mlle de Lespinasse. Julie was the natural child of Mme d'Ablon. For long the identity of her father was unknown. If I am not mistaken, it is the Marquis de Ségur who has told us that he was the brother of Mme du

Deffand, of whom Mlle de Lespinasse was therefore the niece. The family did not acknowledge the young girl and treated her as an inferior, and had even made her swear never to reveal the secret of her birth. Mme du Deffand was greatly taken by her and formed a close friendship with her, and they lived together in St. Joseph's Convent for ten years. We all know the explosion with which the intimacy ended, and that except the loss of her sight, none of Mme du Deffand's troubles touched her so deeply. I need not tell you how, little by little, their association became envenomed; how, little by little, Mlle de Lespinasse, under the stimulus of her passions, felt the yoke of her dependence more galling, nor how, little by little, Mme du Deffand felt her animosity increase. As in all deadly quarrels, there were on both sides mistakes and irreparable words. M. de Ségur takes the part of Mlle de Lespinasse, she is his client. I should be disposed to prefer Mme du Deffand, to whom Mlle de Lespinasse owed her escape from the provincial life that humiliated and oppressed her, as well as most of her culture, her consideration, and her most valuable friendships; and she allowed herself to be used as the instrument of the rancour of the Encyclopædists. Free

thinker though she was—and no doubt because she had great liberty of thought—Mme du Deffand could not endure the philosophers. She found them odiously vain, insolent, insincere and pedantic, and did not conceal her feelings. Initiated by d'Alembert, they adopted Mlle de Lespinasse and made her the Muse of the Encyclopædia. Salon against salon! Public opinion was admirably manœuvred, and it was Mlle de Lespinasse who triumphed over her ageing rival in almost every heart. Her situation made an appeal to every mind—the mystery of her origin, her incontestible charm, her wit and the ardour of a love which (though it was secret) acted like a hidden magnet on every sympathy. But she was nothing more than a brilliant talker and a doting heart, while Mme du Deffand was all thought and reason.

Her salon was not a salon of philosophers and men of letters as Mme de Geoffrin's had been and Mlle de Lespinasse's was to be. La Harpe and Marmontel were seen in it very seldom. Of Marmontel she said, "What pains he takes, what efforts he makes to shine! He's only a vagrant clothed in rags." Diderot went there only once: "There are no hooked atoms between us," she said

of him. Her salon was a salon of the old aristocracy. The Marshals of Luxembourg and of Mirepoix: the Duchesse de la Vallière, the Beauveaux, the Boufflers, the Choiseuls met almost every evening round her chair. One met there President Hénault, the Archbishop of Toulouse, Loménie de Brienne; the Chevalier d'Aydie, who at sixty and over sixty was as young in spirit and as eloquent as when he had loved Mlle Aïssé. There, too, one met Montesquieu, for whom no pleasure, not even reading, equalled Mme du Deffand's suppers; and another constant visitor was Formont, a friend of Voltaire, the delightful conversationalist who said so prettily: "We'll talk of everything and discourse on nothing." Nor must we forget Pont de Veyle, nephew of Mme de Tencin, a childhood's friend of the Marquise who always remained faithful to her. Pont de Veyle was much in request: he was the author of amusing tales and comedies, and in every circumstance of life he showed himself a perfect philosopher. His philosophy, however, was little more than a layer of unchangeable indifference on a foundation of unconquerable boredom, and never was comic author or talker less diverted by his own wit. Grimm, who knew him well, imagined a dialogue between him and Mme du

Deffand which might well have been authentic: "Pont de Veyle!" "Madame!" "Where are you?" "At your chimney corner." "Sprawling, with your feet on the fire dogs, as one is at a friend's?" "Yes, Madame." "One must admit that there are few intimacies of such long standing as ours!" "That's very true!" "Aye, fifty years and more! . . . and in all that time not a cloud, not even the shadow of a coolness!" "That's what I've always thought so wonderful!" "But, Pont de Veyle, isn't it because, at bottom, we've always been very indifferent to one another?" "It may, indeed, well be that, Madame."

Finally, one of the most assiduous guests of the drawing-room had always been d'Alembert. Before he had become famous, the Marquise had known the little man, so slight and frail, who could tell an anecdote so well in his shrill voice, and who was such a perfect mimic. It was his gift for mimicry far more than his geometric mind that had won him his first successes in society. Yet, as his true friend, Mme du Deffand felt obliged to enlighten him as to the harm done by his clowning to his dignity as a man of learning. During how many years had he dined at her table and spent the evenings with her? When he presented himself

for the Academy it was she who conducted his campaign and assured his election. But when Mlle de Lespinasse broke with his benefactress, he followed her and went out slamming the doors. He even went to live in the young lady's house, but without compromising her much, for all Paris knew that when an enthusiastic admirer of his scientific genius exclaimed, "He is a god!" a calmer spirit retorted, "Come, Come! If he were a god, he'd begin by making himself a man!" Mme du Deffand never consoled herself for the loss of d'Alembert, while he conceived for his old friend a hatred that often sullies his letters to Voltaire. Yet, when in 1778 he happened, one day, to meet her old servant and secretary, Wiart, in the Tuileries, he asked news of his mistress. She was touched, and did not omit to mention this "novelty" in writing to Walpole.

Strangers passing through Paris, and in particular Englishmen, never failed to get themselves presented to the Marquise if they could manage it. In her salon they found a picture of the old France and the new, and in spite of themselves* they admired a conversation whose earnestness surprised them,

* Readers of M. André Bellesort's learned and charming books will not need to be reminded of this brilliant writer's antipathy for the Anglo-Saxon—"always in the wrong".—*Translator.*

for our reputation for frivolity and a superficial mind dates neither from yesterday nor from last week. Lord Bath wrote in 1751: "I recall an evening when the talk turned on the history of England. How surprised and confused I was to find that the company knew all our history better than we knew it ourselves!" Our passing guests say pleasant things of us as seldom as possible, yet we could unite an imposing number of testimonies to the seriousness of French conversation and the high level of information; but these will never prevent us from going about bewailing our lack of intellectual curiosity and our ignorance of foreign parts.

In 1765 Mme du Deffand was sixty-eight. She had made no change in the life that she had led for the past thirty years. Her days began at six o'clock in the evening. The great business of the day was supper—"one of the four ends of man's existence", she used to say, adding: "I've forgotten the other three." Every evening she had three or four friends, and on Saturday or Sunday a large party. She did not pay much heed to the supper itself: it was not good living but good conversation that attracted her friends to her table. Her cook's

saucers scandalized President Hénault: "Between him and Mme Brinvilliers" (the famous poisoner), he would sigh, "the only difference is the intention." Conversation went on far into the night—but never far enough for the taste of the hostess. When her guests left she had herself read to, she dictated her letters, and postponed as long as possible the hour when sleep was sought and would not come, the silent hour of insomnia when Loneliness redoubles its cruelty. That dreadful loneliness which terrified her ten times more since she had gone blind! She used to say that she would rather have the company of the Sacristan of the Little Brothers than spend an evening alone. When she went to the Opera or supped with friends, she could not make up her mind to go home and gave orders to her coachman to drive her about the town, through streets as blind and dark as herself.

This same year there was presented to her an Englishman who bore a famous name: the fourth son of Sir Robert Walpole. Horace Walpole had already sat twenty-seven years in the House of Commons—obscurely for that matter. Politics bored him, and on the death of his father he left them and devoted himself to art and letters.

He had had a house built for him on Strawberry Hill. It was in the worst possible taste, but sumptuous. In his *England in the Eighteenth Century*, M. de Rémusat represents him as slight and pale with fine black eyes full of fire, a voice pleasing rather than strong, and a sad smile. A halting gait, the result of gout, contributed to his delicate, almost feminine appearance. He sought to please, and all his faults were veiled, all his qualities thrown into relief by this coquetry. His first impression of Mme du Deffand's salon was as unfavourable as of everything in France. Nearly all English people begin like that: the disparagement of foreign things is a homage that the Anglo-Saxon feels compelled to pay to the virtues of his own country. This little slip of an old woman, with her long narrow face, her delicate features and small beautiful hands, seemed to him a frivolous old creature, and her conversation devoid of interest. But he soon corrected this impression, which did him no honour. He understood the exactness of Voltaire's definition—"a clear-sighted blindness." President Hénault wrote that "the tone of a voice depicted things to her to such a point that one might say of her that sight was a superfluous sense." Walpole was won over by her courage, her

grace, and the dead eyes behind which one felt such a quick intelligence.

It is at this point that the adventure becomes extraordinary. The accent of this foreign voice stirred in Mme du Deffand something she had never felt. Love, which she had sought throughout her youth without finding it, besieged her heart which, since it had not been much used, had kept all its youth and retained almost intact a strength of passion that its friendships and fancies had merely beguiled. At sixty-six she loved a man twenty years her junior, who was merely a passing guest from whom she could expect no reciprocity, whom she had never seen and never could see. In a letter reproaching him for his silence, she writes: "I would gladly pluck out your eyes that people say are so fine, but certainly you cannot suspect that *they* have turned my head." Certainly!

Then whence came this over-mastering feeling that had taken possession of her? Of all the senses, sight plays the greatest part in the origin of passion. It is through the eyes that we drink the philtre of love. Mme du Deffand sees only with the imagination. She has merely passed her hand over this unknown face and divined it. It has been urged that Walpole charmed her by his wit, but no matter

how brilliant he may have been he was not more gifted than many of the men who frequented or had frequented her house. And then, does one fall in love with a man for his wit? There must be a call of the senses, and this attraction existed here only in the tone of the voice. It is rare that the mystery of love is so evidently apparent. Undiscernable exhalations, undefinable vibrations of the atmosphere conquered a heart that for more than fifty years had been refractory to love.

At the beginning of their acquaintance, she drew a pen-portrait of him, a mental portrait without even alluding to the voice whose inflections enchanted. In other respects, the portrait is curious. It begins thus: "No. I will not make your portrait, no one knows you less than I. You seem to me sometimes as I would that you were, sometimes as I fear that you are, and perhaps never as you are. It is your character that should be painted, and of that I am not so good a judge. Indifference is needed, or at least impartiality." She concedes that he is very well bred, very witty, that his temper is pleasant, though not very even, that the knowledge he has of the world and his experience have given him a great contempt for mankind (it would be well to add in this case "and for himself") and

have taught him how to live amongst men. "But," she adds, as she approaches the subject that will cause her so much pain and humiliation, "you have a weakness which is unpardonable. You sacrifice your feelings to it, you order your conduct by it: it is the fear of ridicule. It makes you dependent on the opinion of fools, and your friends are not safe from the impressions that fools try to give you of them. Your head is easily turned."

In truth Walpole was horribly afraid of ridicule. Had Mme du Deffand known the English better, she would not have been surprised. We have no little provincial societies more servile to public opinion than is Anglo-Saxon society, and none that depend more upon it. Walpole, on his return to England, was frightened by the passionate accent of Mme du Deffand's letters. He said to himself that doubtless the Secret Service opened them, then it would be seen that he was passionately loved by an old woman of seventy, that the thing would become known and cover him with ridicule. Do not forget that he had a real friendship for Mme du Deffand, but the terror of becoming a laughing stock got the better of his fear of wounding a friend whose only wrong was her age. On the other hand, he valued this correspondence which brought

him news of a society in which he had been most hospitably received, which interested and amused him, and the rare quality of which he had come to appreciate. So, with that core of harshness which differentiates the gentleman from the gentilhomme he did not hesitate to snub this old and charming woman, and did not shrink from leading her back to the tone of simple friendship with some degree of roughness. Sometimes he chides her, and sometimes he crushes her under his heavy irony. She suffers, and at first she revolts. Then she accepts.

On Wednesday, 16th December, 1767, she writes to him: "Well, yes, I will do without your letters. I should be the most undignified person in the world if I continued to write to you." But four days later we find a letter beginning: "Oh, no, I do not give up the correspondence. I will continue it in any form that you prescribe, even should it be that of an almanac!" Five years later—the 25th July, 1772—she writes: "You wished that we should quarrel, Monsieur, that's the truth. No pretext was needed, but as you sought one you should have chosen one less offensive to me. This is the last lesson I shall receive. It is a pity it has come so late. I confess that I thought that I knew you and could count on the stability of your

character, and I should not have thought that you would sacrifice a real friend to the fear of imaginary ridicule, and that, quite light-heartedly, you would have spread the greatest sorrow and bitterness over what remains of her life." Rather more than a month passes. Walpole keeps silence, and on the 30th August she sends him a little note: "Shall I never have news of you again? I begin to believe it. Does one drop a friend in that way? . . . I propose a peace between us: let us both forget the past. Send me your news. Remember that you have told me a thousand times that you should always be my friend. In spite of all appearances, I can't believe that you are so no more."

On the 5th of July, 1780, two months before her death, after fifteen years of correspondence, she strives again to reassure him on the subject of the letters being opened by the Secret Service. And in her last letter, that of August 22nd, in which she tells him of her approaching end, she says to him: "I have not strength to be afraid, and as I should never see you again in my life, I have nothing to regret in leaving life . . . you will regret me because everyone is glad to be loved." (She keeps the expression *see* as though she still had the use of her eyes.) And Walpole did regret her. "I am

under such extraordinary obligations to her," he said, "that if I did not love her and admire her for herself, my personal gratitude would fill me with regret."

The correspondence of Mme du Deffand with Walpole, which comprises more than fifteen hundred pages, her correspondence with Voltaire, contained in one little volume, her letters to Choiseul and various other friends are not only a mine of documents on the eighteenth century, they are also a psychological treasure and a monument of incurable pessimism. "Are you not aware that I detest life," she writes to Walpole, "that I grieve to have lived so long and cannot console myself for having been born?" . . . ". . . Everything conspires to make one find this world terrible. . . ." ". . . Often I repeat to myself those lines of Saint-Lambert that you (with good cause) thought so sad:

"Woe to him to whom Heaven grants long days! . . .

He who died in his youth was beloved by the Gods. . . .'

". . . There could be only two pleasures for me in this world—society and reading. What society

does one find? Imbeciles who retail nothing but truisms, who know nothing, who feel nothing, who think nothing; a few wits full of themselves, jealous, prying, spiteful, whom one must hate or despise." And then she is as hard on herself as on others. "There is a small number of persons whom I truly esteem *and perhaps I am not among the number*. One cannot fraternize with anyone, and if, as Voltaire said of friendship, 'Without thee every man is lonely,' one must accept an entire loneliness. If the dead were better than the living, that would be a resource, but there is not so much as a book that satisfies one." There she exaggerates. She had read a great deal, and she now had herself a great deal read to. She had a horror of the sentimentality then in fashion and was too fond of Voltaire to relish the *Nouvelle Heloise*. "Precision, ease, light, warmth, these are the qualities that make a good style. Rousseau has light, but it is a flash of lightning: he has warmth, but 'tis the heat of fever." I know more than one professional literary critic who could never have found so good a definition. She judges Buffon severely, for his monotony (is it not rather his solemnity?) seems unbearable to her. Her admiration of Voltaire does not hide the genius of Shakespeare from her:

Macbeth horrifies and interests her. *Cymbeline* charms her. *Othello* quite carries her away. What is still more surprising, she reads the Bible. "Do you know what I am reading now?" she writes to Walpole, "*The Bible*. If you have forgotten it, read it again." But she always returns with more and more satisfaction to the writers of the seventeenth century. "I have the misfortune," she says to Voltaire, "not to be *amusable* by the fine talents of our century, or, if you will, by those who have followed Fontenelle and Lamotte, whom they greatly disparaged and whom they don't equal by any means. Oh, Monsieur, you may say what you like to me, they have no merit save that they wear your livery and I shall always see between you and them the same difference as between the master and the valet." When she is absorbed in the drama of Corneille, his greatness enchants her and she forgives him all his faults. She had the sense of the sublime and would not have been out of her element in a great passion.

But until she met Walpole she had no passion save that of flying from the tedium that she bore within her. And of all the minds of the eighteenth century it is she, with the Voltaire of *Candide*, with Chamfort and Rivarol, who has best seen man in

his futility and our life—our life under sentence of death—in its nothingness. But Voltaire was in love with life for all its shortcomings. Chamfort and Rivarol were sustained by their love of fame. Mme du Deffand had nothing. She had faith in nothing, not even in the most obvious affections. I know of no word sadder than the last that fell from her lips. Wiart, who had served her for more than forty years stood by her bed and wept. “So you really care for me,” she murmured, surprised by this evidence that anyone could have cared for her.

Do you know what one thinks when one has finished reading her enormous correspondence? One thinks that this woman, always in quest of amusement: this unmitigated worldling, this queen of a salon, this enemy of solitude, was a soul born for the cloister and one to whom faith alone was lacking to lead her to the cloister. She had everything else that withdraws people from the world—the clear perception of the wretchedness of humanity, the realization of the futility of pleasure, the disgust at dissimulation, the horror of untruth, everything, in fact, except the one thing needful—everything except Grace.

ANDRÉ BELLESSORT.

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